





# The Weather Vane

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# 01

UNAWARE of the octopus menace growing in the wings, the prisoner woke on the forecastle of The Sea Star.

Bosun Bicklesworth asked, “Where’d ya go thurr, matey?”

The prisoner didn’t know, and he said so. Ocean spray came over the gunnel and washed away the last sliver of his dream.

The bosun said, “Stand up then, yarr.”

The prisoner stood up in the sunshine, and the hard wind blew.

The bosun clapped him on the back and said, “Me thought we’d lost ye, yarr! Aye, we did!”

The prisoner was confused and surveyed the big ship. The sails and rigging blotted out the sky behind the bosun as the ship rocked from side to side, and back and forth. He focused on the blue-uniformed figures on the quarterdeck behind the mainsail. The sails cracked in the wind, and the salty ropes creaked. The prisoner got vertigo. He leaned against the gunnel unsure on his landlubber’s legs. The Jolly Roger flying atop the highest tegelen sail smiled down at him, and he smiled back.

Rosalie put her hand on his back and asked, “Are you ok, love?”

Behind the sails, the sky was scarlet and orange fading to

deep purple. The prisoner looked overhead where the rigging hardly crossed the ship's foremost section. He saw deepest space of night, though it was day on deck and skies were blue near the horizon. He looked again and saw the sky fade to sunset near the zenith. At the zenith, he saw stars and a planet with wispy white stripes. He told Rosalie he was confused.

Bicklesworth thought to help. He said, "Garr! Yer on ye oldie Sea Star, sailin' from one life to yer next. Bo! Hurr!"

Rosalie asked if he remembered. The prisoner noticed a half-dozen others standing with him besides Rosalie and the bosun. The look on the prisoner's face said he did not remember. The bosun frowned. Then the bosun said, "Best we take ye belowdecks, reckon. Yarr."

"Did you fall asleep?" Rosalie asked.

"I, uh...", the prisoner didn't know. "Who are you?"

"Me?" she laughed. "I'm Rosalie."

Bicklesworth said, "And you wouldn't be forgettin' yer old matey the bosun now, would ye? Narr!" The prisoner only frowned as the ship rocked from side to side, and back and forth. The bosun said, "Barr! 'Elp me wi'im, would ya, lady?"

The prisoner said, "It's ok, I got it. Below deck you said? Lead the way." The bosun told Rosalie to stay put, and he led the prisoner to the hatch. They walked past some salty old sea dogs milling about, swabbing the deck and such. They didn't give a glance. A few score non-nautical types watched intently as the prisoner followed the bosun to the hatch.

"Down the hatch master! Aye! Right down ya go! We'll get ye all shipshape 'n' fooly in yer noggin, ain't no concern. Narr."

The prisoner climbed down the ladder until the blue sky was hidden by the ship's timbers. Looking up the ladderwell, he saw the ropes and sail lit with daylight but behind them only the night sky where a greenish planet replaced the old one. Confused and ignorant, the prisoner climbed to the bottom, and the bosun followed him down. The ship rocked along its gait, this way and that way, side to side and back again, creaking



along the way.

The bosun wrapped on a secured hatch three times and unlatched it when there was no reply. He said, “Ave a seat then. I’ll fetch the doc. Aye. Fetch the doc, yarr.”

The bosun and the prisoner had gone impossibly far belowdecks compared to the size of the ship seen from above. The prisoner asked him about it, but the bosun only laughed.

The bosun said, “Aye. She’s a good big ship she is. Wouldn’t ‘ave it no other way! Narr, she woon’t. A good big ship and true! Yarr!”

Bicklesworth walked away mumbling. The prisoner waited. The light through the single porthole played in the kit netted to the overhead. Amnesia occurred to him, and he tried to recall, but his breath was too hot when he breathed, it and he only felt sick.

A brief tap at the door and a red-faced man burst into the room. The doctor’s shiny, crimson, formfitting body suit threw the prisoner for a loop. The shock of unkempt crimson hair made the man altogether ridiculous. The doctor said, “One Two Axelzaxbar, ship’s doctor.” He extended his hand, and the prisoner shook it. “Oh my! Aren’t we the clammy one?” The doctor shook his head *tsk-tsk-tsk*, “That’s not good.” He turned his back to rummage through a hanging net.

The prisoner said, “I’m confused.” One Two Axelzaxbar paid him no mind and moved to a second net, and then a third. “Doctor One Two... what was your name, sir?”

“One Two Axelzaxbar. But please, feel free to call me Twelve. Here, drink this.” Twelve uncorked a gourd and jammed it at the prisoner’s face. Fine mist piped out like a sci-fi piston. The prisoner took a whiff and chugged it.

Twelve plopped down on a stool and stared into his patient’s eyes: first the left, then the right. Left right, left right, the doctor examined his eyes quite closely. “So, my friend, please do tell me. How did you come to be aboard our fair lady?”

“Fair lady?”

“The Sea Star.” Twelve waved his hands around to the deck and bulkheads. “This lovely ship.”

“I don’t remember. I can’t remember anything to speak of.”

“Do you remember Earth?”

The prisoner smiled. “Yeah. I’m definitely from Earth. I’m American.” Then he said, “Is this not Earth?”

“And Mr. Bicklesworth informed me that you nodded off already? On the very first day?”

The prisoner thought, *Did I*, and said, “I don’t think so, but—”

The doctor cocked his eyebrow and gave an incredulous look.

“Well, maybe,” the prisoner corrected himself.

Twelve said, “Well, if you did then I’m quite surprised, *quite surprised* mind you, that you’re still here!”

The prisoner said, “Why’s that?”

“Don’t you remember the orientation?”

“No.”

“I see.” Twelve frowned and looked away. “Well then, the skinny-minnie of it is that you died on Earth and ascended, or maybe you ascended in life, it happens you know, and you made it to the Port of Higher Calls from whence we’ve departed just this morning. Does it make bells ring for you?”

The prisoner shook his head no.

“We ferry the Ascendant from their home worlds to their next port of call. The thing is, with you though... you can’t fall asleep! Are you sure you don’t remember the orientation?”

“I sure don’t.”

“Well, the thing is: you mustn’t fall asleep! If your attention disintegrates, then so will you! Do you understand?”

“I died?”

“Maybe you did, I don’t know. I fear you’re dead now, but let me explain. You cannot fall asleep on The Sea Star because it is only an unbending intent that will guide us to your destination. Those who fall asleep fade away.”

The prisoner showed the doctor his hands. “Well... I’m still here, man.”

“Yes, but Bosun Bicklesworth tells me you were nodding off.”

A long moment passed, and the prisoner said, “Well... I was dreaming, so, yeah. I guess I fell asleep.”

“Most interesting, my boy! An exceptional case! An exciting event!” He snatched the gourd out of the prisoner’s hand and licked the strung cork. “Do tell me. What was your dream?” The doctor jumped his stool back and kicked his red-booted feet up on the bench where the prisoner sat.

“I don’t remember.”

“I see! I see! You don’t remember. Of course! You don’t remember the dream you had on the forecastle.” The doctor dropped his feet and scooted closer than the prisoner cared for. Twelve said, “But riddle me this then, my good man: how did you come to be on the forecastle?”

“I don’t—,” the prisoner began when a vision came to him. “I was watching some mermaids play near the bow.”

“Yes of course! The merfolk. Beautiful creatures! I fancied more’n a few mermaidens in my time. Beautiful creatures.” Twelve winked slyly. “Life at sea’s different than life ashore, you know!” He jabbed his fingers into the prisoner’s ribs and smiled a wide mouthful of very pink teeth. He said, “Life at sea’s different than life ashore, you know,” and prodded the prisoner with his finger again.

The prisoner said, “Dude,” as he brushed the doctor’s hand away.

Twelve said, “Hmmm... well, yes, it is, you know.” He relented in his prodding and gave the prisoner room to breathe his too hot breath. In a hardly audible whisper, the doctor muttered, “Quite different, you know.” A moment passed, and the doctor winked. The prisoner chose to smile. Was it good that his memory was coming back, or was it bad that he was discussing the delights of the mermaidens with a red man in a red body suit in a dingy ship’s hold? The prisoner did not

know.

The prisoner said yes and no when the doctor asked him many more questions. He listened intently to everything the doctor said, but it didn't quite come together as a coherent narrative.

Twelve said, "Alright, my boy. Back up on deck with you. Unless you've some questions for me."

"You mentioned that people, uh... you said those of us who fall asleep fade away. Why didn't I fade away?"

"That is an excellent question to which I will be devoting my full attention when I return to university." One Two Axelzaxbar, R.R., M.D., Ph.D., Ph.Q., Z.ζ.7 stood and opened the hatch to the gangway where he motioned the prisoner to be on his way.

The prisoner said, "And one other thing. We're all dead?"

"Oh no, my boy! We're very much alive. You Ascendant have only shuffled from one mortal coil to the next, and those of us in the ship's crew know nothing but life. Move along now. Abovedecks with you."

The prisoner had one more question but chose not to ask it. He preferred to believe that he misunderstood the doctor's blathering.

# 02

ON deck, no one was talking, and the prisoner didn't have much to say. He loved the sea, the weather was beautiful, and the creaky Sea Star seemed as right as rain. The sky was a delight. He watched the clouds roll in from the horizon and then get sucked into the void of space where high noon would have been if there was a sun.

A big cloud rolled toward The Sea Star, a nimbus. The prisoner's gaze drifted from the cloud to the cyan sky at the horizon. He rolled his gaze back above where the colors of the sky darkened until a ring of sunset hues began near sixty degrees. Near the vertical, a blue gas planet with neon orange stripes was circled by sharp gray-brown rings like Saturn's. The forward edge of the cloud began to dance against the sunset. Then the poofy cloud became turbulent at the sky's last purple brink before the star field began. A few tornadoes formed far above The Sea Star, and then, all at once, the whole cloud, even the calm part set against the still blue sky, was sucked out into space never to be seen or heard from again.

"Well, dang," the prisoner said.

Rosalie surprised him, "I used to watch clouds with my husband." The prisoner turned. She said, "He would have loved to see that."

The prisoner said, "It doesn't quite look natural does it?"

She said, “You’re one to talk, mister! You’re not looking too good.”

He glanced at his arm again, but, really, he was watching the clouds to keep his mind off it. His skin was looking a little waxy. He was constipated. He said, “I mean... if the clouds at the edge get sucked in there, then how come all the air doesn’t get sucked out too?”

“Air?” she giggled.

“What’s funny?”

“There’s no air, love. All of this is magic.”

“Oh magic, huh? Who told you that?”

“It just is. Can’t you see it?”

“I can’t, no.”

“Are you ok?” She put her hand on his shoulder.

His shoulder felt numb like it had fallen asleep but without the pins and needles. He wore only a thin tunic, but her touch felt like he was under a heavy coat. He pointed to the deck and said, “Well, if it’s magic then why are those ropes’ shadows over there when there’s no sun in the sky over there?” He pointed to the sky behind her.

Rosalie said, “Sorry. Everyone’s so quiet.” Then she said, “We’re going to be here a while, and you just reminded me of Ben when you were looking up at the clouds like that.” He didn’t say anything. “I’m Rosalie,” she said.

He took her up on it. The prisoner said, “Well, hello there, Rosalie.” He took her extended hand and said, “I’m having a problem understanding what’s going on.”

“Having A Problem Understanding What’s Going On?! Such a long name!” The prisoner liked her joke. She said, “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” he said. After a moment, he said, “So, Rosalie, tell me. What are you up to these days?”

“Not much, just waiting for the viewing to start.”

“Do you remember how you got here?”

“I sure do. I died in my sleep and woke up in a room at Barney’s.”

He thought about it. When she didn't say more, he asked, "And who is Barney, and what belongs to him?"

"Barney keeps the inn at the Port of Higher Calls. Rejoice, my friend. We are Ascendant!" He couldn't share her enthusiasm. She saw on his face that he was sad, and the extent of his ignorance registered with her. She said, "Do you remember your path, love?"

"My path?" Her eyes widened, and he said, "No, I don't remember anything." He looked around for another cloud that might disappear, but they were all far out in the blue zone. His headache had worsened since he began talking. The prisoner said, "What was your path?"

"Oh! I was a witch!" She cackled an emphatically witchy cackle.

The prisoner thought about it and went with it. "A witch, huh? What's a witch do?"

"Professionally? Mostly I did remote viewing work for various shady organizations. Then after Ben died, I retired and moved to the mountains."

That rung his bell. A long and craggy canyon formed in his mind. In the distance, the floor of the valley was green. Higher up, there were no plants, only rocks. Then it was gone, and he couldn't be sure he'd seen it.

Rosalie saw the thoughts on his face. "You know... we're all about the same as you. No one knows what's to come. Everyone's just waiting and thinking."

He glanced around. There was a skeleton crew on deck with about a hundred other somber Ascendant quietly alone on the big ship.

Rosalie said, "It's just that you reminded me of Ben so much there. I didn't mean to bother you."

He said, "No, it's fine. I don't mind." She looked to the horizon. He began, "You know the other day—," but he corrected himself since there was no night or day, or even any time at all other than the clouds blowing across the sky and ship's pendulum gait. He said instead, "When I fell asleep, you were

there.”

“Did you fall asleep?”

“I don’t know, but you were there, right?”

“I was. I was in my own little world thinking about things and then Mr. Bicklesworth starts raging like a madman and charging over to us, ‘Shake ‘im ‘wake! Shake ‘im ‘wake!’ and I shook your arm but you didn’t seem asleep to me.”

The prisoner said, “He brought me to see the doctor. He mentioned an orientation.”

Rosalie said, “You don’t remember it?”

The prisoner said, “Can you tell me what they said?”

She said, “Sure I can, love,” and she told him.



# 03

ROSALIE woke in a rustic room not at all unlike the cabin at the entrance to her mountain compound. She was worried but immediately noticed the note on her bedside table. It explained that she died and was Ascendant, and that she should go downstairs where she could get something to eat when she was ready. She thought it might have been a trick even though her senses reassured her. When she looked to her face in the mirror, it was forty years ago, and she felt just fine. She listened to the sounds coming from outside and got back into bed to sleep a little more. She slept deeply and woke again. She checked the mirror to see if she was still young. She was. Her thin gray hair was red and thick, and wavy and vibrant. Her cherub's cheeks were high and smooth. The note said there were clothes for her in the closet, so she took off the night gown, dressed, and opened the door. The sounds were jovial as she walked down the hall. After two turns and some stairs, she came to a restaurant and was seated by a young girl.

The waitress said, "Can I get you something to eat, ma'am?"

Rosalie looked around and didn't see anyone else sitting by themselves. "I suppose. What do you have?"

"Special today is bear stew. We've got kelp salad, bread, rye bread, sour bread, hard bread, and soggy bread. If ya got something else in mind, Barney might get it together for ya."

Rosalie looked around again and didn't see a mirror. She was apprehensive because that didn't sound like the menu in heaven. Rosalie said, "Yes, love." She looked fully around to her left and fully around to her right hoping to see something to make her feel more sure, but there was nothing. Instead, she grabbed a handful of her hair. It was young and strong, and that was convincing enough. She said, "You don't have any," she winked, "mushroom ravioli, do you?"

"Mushroom ravioli, ma'am?"

Rosalie wasn't sure if she'd said too much, but she nodded confidently.

The girl said, "Let me check." The girl disappeared and reappeared and said they didn't. Rosalie had the salad and the bread, and it was pretty good.

When she was done, she asked the girl, "Tell me, love, are these the other Ascendant?"

"No, ma'am. They've gone to the park. I don't think any of the others went back to sleep after they read their notes." The girl winked and was gone.

*The park, eh?* Rosalie walked outside and saw the green space down the road. She walked, and it was obvious that the Ascendant were there. Their energy was undeniable. She had never felt so much living energy in one place. Not by a long shot.

A man called to her, "Rosalie, over here." He told her what he'd told the others. She should make herself at home, but she mustn't wander too far. She could come as far as the park and go down by the docks and the pier, but she shouldn't stray far from Ascendico Boulevard. The man said, "You're safe here, but the dock is never really the safest place." He told her that The Sea Star couldn't approach the pier until the wind picked up. Until that happened, there was nothing to do but wait.

The man walked away, so Rosalie sat quietly among the other Ascendant who also sat in the park. After six days, the wind picked up. On the seventh day, it seemed like the whole town would blow away. The girl came to Rosalie's room and

told her that it was time to go. Rosalie gathered with the other Ascendant in the restaurant. She made small talk with another woman, Carla, and then the front door blew open. It scared her. The roar of the wind and rain was terribly loud.

The man from the park came in. Before he shut the door, Rosalie saw a whole cart turned on its side and pushed by the wind down Ascendico Boulevard. The man gave each Ascendant person a length of rope and instructed them how to tie a harness for themselves. After an hour, he had checked everyone's knots and handed each aspiring master a pair of carabini-ers. He told them to line up by the door single file and attach themselves to the rope outside so they wouldn't get blown away. The man said, "Just keep putting one foot in front of the other and you'll make it. I've been doing this a long time. I never saw one of you lot get blown away in the storm."

Someone asked, "Why not do it when the weather is better?"

The man said, "You'll see."

The driving rain hurt, but they slogged single file down to the dock where The Sea Star was moored. It was a catamaran, two individual sailing ships connected by some crossbeams. One hull sat at the dock, and another was fifty feet in the air, completely out of the water. The sails were furled on the lower hull's masts, but the force of the wind at the broad array of nested sails on the multiple masts of the upper hull kept the second ship aloft in a precarious balancing act. The second hull swept in the air as the winds roared and waned, and as the hull in the water rode the waves.

Rosalie thought the wind would blow her off her feet, but it didn't. She kept putting one foot forward and then the other until all the Ascendant in front of her stopped and she stopped too. The angle of the deck on the flying ship was such that gravity should have pulled all the sailors into the sea, but it didn't. As much as Rosalie could see through the deluge, the sailors on the flying hull were walking and working at about seventy degrees to the vertical. The people in front of her got

on the lower ship, and then it was her turn to climb the net draped over the side. The lower ship rocked a lot as the unconstant wind pushed the upper ship higher and dropped it into its lulls.

The young officer leaned close and yelled in Rosalie's ear, "Use your hands on the verticals, put your feet on the horizontals." He showed her what he meant by grabbing two vertical ropes and shaking them. He grabbed a horizontal rope and shook his finger in her face. "No!"

She climbed up. Other Ascendant climbed up behind her. The officer climbed up, and then two deckhands pulled the net up and over. Besides what might have been a hundred miles of sail and rigging, there were ropes strung across various portions of the deck, and she was shown how to loop her foot in the rope near one of the cleats, and to hold the rope behind her back and under her arms.

The Sea Star was quickly underway, and then Rosalie was very glad to have the rope. The pitching was as violent as the dickens as The Sea Star somehow remained halfway balanced in the air. She heard a yell and a thud behind her as someone was flung into the sea when The Sea Star cleared the jetty. A big wave came over the port side to wash two more away. Rosalie had seen plenty of violence and didn't wince, but many others did when a body was thrown into the air. It smashed against the mast as the ship rolled back in the trough. Then that Ascendant person was lost in the water.

Suddenly sailors were about a big commotion. A man was signaling to the higher ship with a pair of flags. Rosalie looked up to see the sails levering the big ship up start to furl, and then the sails around her were unfurled. The Sea Star's sails blocked her view as they caught the wind. The higher ship dropped, and the lower deck pitched over until it became a vertical wall. As the higher ship dropped, the lower ship was hoisted higher and higher until gravity normalized and the storm was gone. It was daylight on a calm sea. The Ascendant looked about con-

fused and awestruck from above by the cosmic porthole landscape of stars.

One of the officers said they were going to sail out into the deep water and then have a viewing. They would sit on the deck and watch each other's entire lives play out like movies projected onto the mizzen sail. Since almost everyone had made it so far, the viewing was going to take a long time. The crew had experts that would also watch, and they would decide who would disembark where based on what they saw. The Ascendant were ascending to join the Guild of the Greater Good in the fight against the Eternal Enemy.

"Any questions?" the officer asked.

Someone called out, "So if someone lived to be eighty years old then how long will that take to watch?"

"Eighty years. Any other questions?"

Olunkuna said, "Why are there so many more Ascendant women than men?" There were about three for every two men. She asked, "Are we that much stronger?"

The officer said, "Ah, no. We have polygamy in Exland so... any other questions?"

There were several more questions. The officer answered them all patiently and left them with a stern warning. "Yer among the most powerful people from yer whole planet. Yer from this nation 'n' that nation, and this time 'n' that time, but we know ya understand what sleep is. Ya might think yer getting tired but yer not! Think of this fine ship—"

A refrain of sailors chimed in from the rigging.

"A fine ship!"

"Yarrr."

"The finest ship, yarr!"

The officer continued, "Think of The Sea Star as a dream. Don't letcher mind wander. Somethin' 'portant brought ya here, and keep yer minds on it. If ya 'cide 'o take a nap, then that'll be the end o' ya. Case closed. No more you!"

# 04

THE main deck was shrouded in ropes and sail. The Sea Star was so long and big, there was hardly an unobstructed line of sight from fore to stern. The ship's crew were about a steady business of sailing and maintenance, but it was hard for the Ascendant to know what the crew did.

The prisoner jumped to his feet. He said, "But why is the shadow here and not there? It doesn't make any sense! There's no sun!" He had taken ill. His stomach felt like a ton of lead.

Riz said, "No, sir. The light comes down from the sunset like a waterfall." Riz pointed again to the sketch he'd made as if one more glance would finally convince the prisoner that The Sea Star's science-spurning shadows were in good order.

Riz was alive five centuries earlier than the prisoner, and the prisoner couldn't debate the man, not for lack of trying, so he walked away. The prisoner felt horrible. He was drinking and eating, but his bowels hadn't moved since Twelve gave him that stinking goured potion. His hands were a deathly taupe shade. He couldn't get a straight answer out of the crew, and the other Ascendant were uniformly too uneducated or too mystical to make any sense when the prisoner tried to rationalize things.

Ishikawa, who had been a samurai and a nobleman in Japan's Tokugawa shogunate, and who had studied in the Portuguese school in his prefecture, was regaling Rosalie and two other women with tales of battle and intrigue when it happened. The world's worst, most cavernous sloppy roast beef fart escaped the prisoner's backside. Ishikawa's hawkish features contorted into a mask of disgust.

Rosalie said, "Oh my!"

A few others made their similar sentiments known with lesser but varying degrees of tact.

The prisoner smelled it, and it was the worst of his life. It was the worst by far. He threw his hands up in frustration. He pointed at Ishikawa. "I mean how the fuck does he speak English? And you, French caveman, how the fuck do you speak English?" There was another group of three black men and a black-looking woman looking at him. The prisoner waved his hands angrily at them and said, "He literally invaded Spain from Africa and he speaks perfect fucking English, man! I mean... what the fuck!?"

Then he realized he'd soiled his britches too. A slow, wet slop worked its way down his trouser leg. He considered the disgust turning to pity on the faces around him and felt ashamed. "I'm sorry about that, y'all." Not knowing where he could clean himself, he headed belowdecks. He wanted to see Twelve again.

Just before the prisoner reached the hatch, a sailor in the rigging yelled, "Arrr! Poseidon give us a breeze!"

When the prisoner turned to mount the ladder, he saw his trail on the deck. It was something like uncooked sausage links and blood. He missed his handhold on the ladder, slammed his chin on the third rung, and fell down the shaft to land in another ghastly, poopy fart explosion.

The carpenter's mate dropped his work planing a new hull plank. "Careful tharr, master, ye— Oh, have mercy on me all ye fish in the sea!" He covered his nose and mouth with an oil

cloth. “Are ye shipshape, master?” The mate kept his distance. Then he stepped back.

The prisoner groaned, “Would you get Doctor Snacks Bar for me, please?” The prisoner thought his jaw was broken, but he didn’t want to check because his hands were covered with mess. His trouser britches ripped in the fall. He said, “Twelve, I mean. The red man.”

“Aye, arrr.” The carpenter’s mate avoided the second hatch at the prisoner’s feet and climbed down another ladder at the back of the hold.

Shadows danced around the prisoner. Several heads were visible at the top of the ladderwell, but he couldn’t see their faces for the light streaming down behind them from blackest night. Rosalie yelled, “Are you ok? It looked like you fell.” Her voice sounded funny because she was holding her nose.

The prisoner said, “Don’t come down here.”

Ishikawa laughed. *As if.*

“Are you ok, love?”

The prisoner looked at his hands and felt the throbbing in his chin. “No, Rosalie. I don’t think I am.”

A voice he didn’t recognize asked, “Dost thou require aide, comrade?”

“Outta my way, yous,” a burly sailor jostled past Rosalie and the others. He slid down the ladder despite the prisoner’s protestations.

The burly sailor said, “Yer right messy thurr, master. Yarr, ya are.” The sailor nudged one of the prisoner’s chunks with his boot. “Ne’er saw a sick passenger ‘fore. Narr! Narr, not a one.” He looked at the prisoner as if expecting an answer. The crisscrossed creases in the sailor’s furrowed brow cracked the leather skin from eyes to scalp. The prisoner heard whispers from whoever Rosalie was with.

The sailor pressed the prisoner. “Mr. Bicklesworth woke ye from yon nap, did he?” The prisoner looked away, and the sailor raised his voice, “Yarr er narr, tell me now!”



The prisoner made a show of wiping his hands on his ruined britches. The sailor kicked him in the foot and bellowed, "Dammit! I'm the sailing master o' this ship and I'll know my heading." Then he added in a tone of reconciliation, "Yarr, I will." He tossed the prisoner one of the carpenter's oil rags. "Was it ye who napped and yet remain? Answer you me."

"Yarr! 'Twas I," the prisoner answered.

A great smile spread across the sailing master's fat, wrinkled face. "Yarr! Methought 'twere ye!"

The prisoner realized he didn't feel so bad once the embarrassment was wearing thin. He said, "Yarr!"

The sailing master yarred again, and a few enthusiastic yells of, "Yarr," came down from above.

The sailing master tucked his fat ogre's thumbs into his belt and rocked back on his boot heels. "Yarr, yer alright, matey." He looked around. "Were Mr. Woodwright in 'ere when ye entered?"

The prisoner didn't know who Mr. Woodwright was. He said, "He went to go get the doctor."

The prisoner stood up and ignored the flow of bodies from his trousers. The sailing master frowned at the aromatic wave but stood unflinchingly. "C'mere, young master. Wasser name?" The prisoner told him that he couldn't remember. The sailing master introduced himself as Mr. Black. Mr. Black offered his hand in a startling display of poor hygiene. The prisoner wiped his hand one more time with the rag and shook Mr. Black's hand which was like a mooring cleat hanging five wood bananas.

Mr. Black said, "Garr, tharr," and pointed to his own chin. "Ye've got a wee thing 'anging free." He reached out his other hand and plucked something from the prisoner's face. In Mr. Black's hand, the prisoner saw his chin.

"Good sir! I'll not have the ship's crew scouring the flesh from my wards!" Twelve burst into the room in a brilliant red flash. The spastic motion would have reminded the prisoner of Kramer from Seinfeld if he could have remembered, but he

could not. Dr. Twelve said, “Remand that flesh to me this instant, Mr. Black,” and stomped his foot emphatically. “Harumph!” Mr. Black tossed the chin to him, wished them both good day, and climbed abovedecks.

The sails hung slack, but the clouds showed that the wind would pick up soon. The smell lingered, so Rosalie walked away from it, which was hard to do with no wind. A few of the ship’s crew and more than a few Ascendant made their way to observe the prisoner’s leavings. Rosalie walked all the way to the bow and even leaned forward a little trying to smell the salty blue water. It wasn’t far enough, and she walked toward the stern. She went down the stair from the forecandle to the main deck, then down another stair to the waist of the ship where the gunnel became a bulwark.

On The Sea Star’s waist, Rosalie took note of an eccentric man, and her rush slowed to a meander. He was an older man with a peg leg, an eye patch, and a hook hand. He advised some discipline for half a dozen men, all replete with limbs, hoisting a cargo net through an open deck plate. He said, “Altogether now, lads! Put yer backs into it!”

The man looked at Rosalie, and she felt awkward when he caught her looking at his eye patch instead of his one good eye. He said, “The poopdeck.”

Rosalie said, “Yes, excuse me. I was trying to get away from it.”

“Narr, lass. The poopdeck is where ye wanna be. Aft o’ da quarterdeck.” He pointed the way she was heading and shooed his nose.

“Yes, the poopdeck.” She’d heard the term before.

The men drawing the cargo heaved again, and most of the big net appeared. It looked very heavy, and she counted four blocks in the rigging. Ben would have liked that. He was an engineer. He had been.

The man sunk his hook into the net. When he pulled it, a crane arm that Rosalie didn’t notice at first creaked. The man leaned into it and pushed with his peg leg while balancing on

the good foot. He said, "Watch out, lass. 'Tis heavy, aye."

"Oh, of course. Excuse me." The great old winch creaked and swiveled toward her as she took a few steps back. The sound of the wooden joints' twisting soothed and distracted her.

"Alright, lads," he said. The ropes went slack, and the load dropped onto the deck. As the slack went from the net's drawline, a few things spilled here and there. The peg-legged man began to hobble aforeships.

Rosalie stopped him. "Sir? Sir, excuse me?"

He turned and gave her an inquisitive eye.

"Hello, I'm Rosalie."

He nodded.

"And you are?"

"They call us Lefty. Aye, so they do."

"Oh dear! I see." The man's left leg, left hand, and left eye were missing, and the moniker seemed in good agreement with her general impression of business aboard *The Sea Star*. "May I ask what task you men have at hand?"

"Yarr," Lefty replied and left it at that.

"I've just noticed that the crew keep so busy, but our destination is so far away. What's in these bags?" She waved to the net where Lefty's lads sorted the swag.

"Oh, aye! What's in the bags is a mystery, young master lady. 'Ave a look if it'll make ye right."

"I can have a look?"

Lefty said, "Aye. We're 'ere at yer service. Do as ya please."

Rosalie liked the sentiment but knew it wasn't entirely true. The Ascendant weren't to go belowdecks uninvited, they weren't to cross the cordon on the quarterdeck, and, even then, they weren't to linger on the quarterdeck where the captain and bridge crew drove the ship. Bicklesworth had been rather keen on that. He'd said, "And don't ye linger! Narr, narr, narr! No lingerin'!!!"

She squeezed into the fray of sailors stacking the bags and barrels. She introduced herself making pleasantries, and the

sailors did the same.

“Yarr.”

“Yarr.”

“Hurr.”

“Durr.”

Rosalie picked up a burlap sack and was surprised to see the word MYSTERY stenciled in blue paint. She set it down and picked up a jug. UNKNOWN was etched into the hard-fired clay. She shot Lefty an inquisitive look. He smiled and gimped down the ladder where the deck plate was open. She rolled a barrel on its side: THINGS. More Ascendant joined her inspection as they too tried move toward the stern. She liked their curiosity. The general conservative demeanor of her fellows was a drag.

Porfirio asked Rosalie, “What do you make of it?” He and Rosalie had become acquainted during the prisoner’s if-you’re-all-speaking-English-then-why-don’t-you-have-English-names rant.

Before Rosalie could answer, one of the others, a tiny pygmy of a man, answered. He said, “I don’t know *what* to make of it.”

Rosalie said, “Only one way to find out.” She lifted a small jug above her head.

From nowhere, one of the sailors grabbed her wrist. It didn’t hurt, but the man’s hand might have been an iron manacle. He said, “Narr, me sweet sea fire. Can’t be spilling the secrets just yet now, can we?” She relinquished the jug and noticed SECRETS printed on the side. The man shook his head and placed the jug with the other jugs of secrets. “Narr,” he muttered. She looked at the other sailors, and they cast disapproving looks.

Curiosity culled if not quite satisfied, the Ascendant moved back from the sailors that returned to organizing their haul. The gathered Ascendant climbed onto the quarterdeck, moved quickly across it, and climbed onto the poopdeck where the air was fresh enough. Some of them laid down to stare at the sky

and space. Rosalie leaned against the gunnel. Daria slid next to her. She said, "Did he call you sea fire? That's nice."

"He did," Rosalie said, glad of the conversation.

Daria said, "It's very fitting. I could have sworn your hair was on fire once, but it was only blowing in the wind."

Rosalie said, "Don't you say the sweetest things. I'm Rosalie."

"Daria."

In her new life at sea, Rosalie's youth had returned, and every Ascendant person was young and healthy. Rosalie twirled her hair in her fingers half as much as the others watched the waves break and the sky roll.

Rosalie said, "I love this," taking the sleeve of Daria's silky gown. They talked for a long time, a day or more, before the prisoner climbed up the ladder looking worse than ever. Rosalie frowned at him.

He said, "I'm a zombie!"

# 05

BICKLESWORTH told the prisoner, “It’s the fluctuations in the root mean square of the variance.” The prisoner squinted his eyes, and the bosun added, “Yarr, ‘tis,” and winked.

The prisoner couldn’t argue with the bosun’s logic. The explanation was pretty good, but a hundred other things on board made no sense at all. He said, “Rosalie told me The Sea Star is really a catamaran. Where’s the other hull then?”

“Down below, low down beneath, aye.”

“Where is it though?” The prisoner gestured for the bosun to follow him to the gunnel. The prisoner leaned far out over the water and didn’t see it. “Where?”

“Bo! Hurr! It’s down thurr, young master. D’ye see water lappin’ ‘gainst the ‘ull?”

The prisoner did not and said so. He’d assumed that was just the breadth of the big ship.

The bosun said, “Down there ‘tis, skirtin’ a dangerous nether realm ‘tween thither and yon, and ye wouldn’t wanna fall inter. Narr, siree.”

The prisoner leaned out even further. He saw no evidence of any waves reflecting off the hull. *How did I not notice that before?*

“Careful tharr, ‘tis a dangerous nether realm ‘tween ‘ere and

thurr. Bo, hurr.”

The prisoner thought about it for a moment, and though he didn't think the bosun was lying, he declared, “Bullshit,” and picked up a length of rope.

Bosun Bicklesworth put his hand on the prisoner's arm when he saw the prisoner meant to rappel over the side. “Narr, narr, narr, master. We can't 'ave that, now. Narr way in heck.”

“Why not? If I die here then that must mean I wasn't the one who wins your Guild war for you, right?”

The bosun's fat cheerful face went grim. He'd heard that line of reasoning before. The bosun's countenance was so changed and gaunt that the prisoner felt uncomfortable and stopped tying the rope around his waist. The bosun looked at him hard. There was no silliness on that face.

The prisoner said, “What? Am I wrong?”

“Narr. Yer not wrong, master, but that's dangerous thinkin'. Aye, 'tis.”

“What of it then? Pull me back up when I yell.”

“Don't do it, master. If ye slip and get lost, y'll suffer. 'Tain't just dyin'.”

“I'll be fine,” the prisoner said. He secured the other end of the rope to a cleat on deck. He threw the rope over the side and was surprised that the rope didn't hang slack. It followed the curve of the hull and rolled out of sight beneath the ship. The prisoner mounted the gunnel and then half walked and half rappelled down the outer hull.

“Be careful, master,” the bosun said. “We'll pull ye right back up. Yarr, we will,” and he continued to mutter as the prisoner descended.

The gravity was wrong. The prisoner's feet kept stepping on the hull even as he descended past the overhang. He looked up and saw Bicklesworth wave one last wave before the overhang blocked his line of sight. He looked down, and the water didn't seem any closer. Then he looked to the aft and nearly slipped when he saw a waterfall of the ocean spilling out into the void of space. He took two more steps, and underneath

the ship he saw another set of sails. Another two steps and he saw the crossbeams. The prisoner was fully surrounded by space. The star field felt cold. The rush of water all around seemed like it should pour onto him, but the torrents bent away. He called for the bosun to pull him back up, but the man must not have heard. Then the prisoner grabbed the rope and began to pull himself up. When he pulled, all the dead flesh sloughed off the palm of his hand, and he lost his grip. He fell about twenty feet before the rope snapped taught. The harness held fast, and he dangled there, taking in the ocean above, the star field, and the other ocean that The Sea Star's second section sailed. He looked at his hand. He could see the hand bones and the finger bones.

The yank on the rope at the prisoner's slip alerted the bosun, and he pulled him back up. Bicklesworth said, "Did ye slip?"

"Aye, we did," the prisoner said. He was glad to see the warm happiness back on the bosun's face.

"Did ye see yon' other 'ull."

"I sure did, thanks."

"So, yer satisfied then, are ye?"

"I want to go down there?"

"To the other 'ull?"

"I want to see how what we see up here looks from down there."

The bosun was exasperated. He said, "Narr, ya can't go down tharr. Narp."

"Why not?"

"I'll tell ya why not, Mr. Sleepy Head. It's because yer a mimsy wonka."

"A what?"

"A mimsy wonka. Aye, 'tis whatcha are. Yarr."

"What the fuck is a mimsy wonka?"

At that, the bosun's face brightened and became full of joy. "What did ye ask me thurr, young master?"

"I said, 'What's a mimsy wonka?'"



“Aye, I thought that’s whatcha said. Yarr, me thought ‘twere just so, aye. Come wi’ me. Barr!”

They descended from the main deck to the waist where the bulwark was too high for even a tall man to look over. Then they climbed up the taller ladder onto the quarterdeck where the bulwark gave way to a rail of fancy carpentry. The bosun unclipped the purple velvet cordon rope which was crisp and new, and not salty and old like everything else on *The Sea Star*. The bosun and the prisoner took the attention of the helmsman at the wheel, the navigator at the table, and the captain and his first mate behind them. The bosun told the prisoner that it was alright to step forward. Then Bosun Bicklesworth clipped the purple rope’s golden fastener back where it was.

Captain Atlas said, “What are you about, Bicklesworth? He shouldn’t be over here.”

“This young master wants to know what a mimsy wonka is.”

Smiles spread across the faces of the bridge crew in unison. The captain said, “Oh? He does, does he?”

“Aye, Captain. ‘E do! Yarr, me ‘eard it with me own ears just now. Not forty moments ago, narr.”

The captain said to the prisoner, “Is it true?”

The prisoner said, “The fuck is a mimsy wonka?”

The captain turned to the first mate, Lieutenant Commander Mancuso, and said, “Go for it.”

Mancuso stepped forward and began singing to the tune of *He’s a Jolly Good Fellow*, “For he’s a mimsy old wonka, for he’s mimsy old wonka—” Music from a ragtime band filled the air, and suddenly the quarterdeck was three times wider than it had been.

The prisoner looked to the bow. There, he saw sailors singing along, doing acrobatic tricks in the rigging. The song went on with dozens of voices sounding louder than a jet engine. “And so say of all of us!” A loud cymbal crashed on the word *us*, and the prisoner jumped. He looked in the other direction and quickly moved out of the way for a marching band wearing

all white, and even gleaming white patent leather shoes. “And so say all of us!”

The song went on. “For he’s a mimsy old wonka, for he’s a mimsy old wonka. And so say all of us!” At that *us*, the hatch to the space under the poopdeck burst open, and a line of tropically themed Rockettes in Carmen Miranda headgear pranced out. They sang along and kicked their long legs high. From the other direction, a line of sailors wove through the Rockettes, dancing with their mops and swabbing the deck theatrically with vaudevillian vim.

The song went on. The prisoner watched the sparkling choreography of the Rockettes and sailors doing a number in front of the band stepping in place where they played their tune behind the navigator’s table. “For he’s a mimsy old wonka, for he’s a mimsy old wonka. Which nobody can deny!”

The bosun yelled the last line right into his ear, and it jolted the prisoner again. “Which nobody can deny!” After his glance, the song and the music ended, and the quarterdeck was its usual size. There was no dancing, no Rockettes, and no band.

Bosun Bicklesworth clapped the prisoner on the back. “Nardy narr, narr narr. Nobody can deny it fer ye now, can they?” The prisoner didn’t know what to make of it. During a few hundred years aboard *The Sea Star*, he never again expressed any irritation with something not making sense.

The captain told the prisoner that he stunk, and they should get the doctor. The captain wanted to boil him to get all the rotting flesh off him. The doctor assured the prisoner that he would be fine, so they made a fire on the main deck and brought a big black cauldron full of seawater to a bubbling boil. The prisoner put his hand in the steam. It didn’t hurt, so he dipped a finger in the water. It didn’t hurt, so he hopped it and sat there for a while. After that, he was just a skeleton.

# 06

NOT long after the cauldron, the bosun went around the ship telling the Ascendant that they'd reached deep water, and the viewing would start soon. He said they should head to the poopdeck and sit so they could see the mizzen sail hanging from The Sea Star's sternmost mast.

The prisoner and Rosalie sat next to each other. "Here we go," he said. He offered his hand, he was wrapped in cloth like a mummy then, and she took it.

After all the Ascendant were situated, the captain addressed them. He congratulated them on making it so far and said, "In my experience, this first viewing is when yer most apt to nod off and fade away. Try and stay awake. Don't forget." He told them that when the person whose life they were watching goes to sleep every night, they might be tempted to think of that as their own sleep and drift into a slumber themselves. "So be attentive. Be vigilant." He had an aside with Lieutenant Commander Mancuso and then said, "Oh, aye. And be compassionate. Other people's lives're all different than yer own."

Altogether, about a hundred Ascendant sat on the poopdeck waiting for the viewing to start. After about five minutes, two men in black body suits appeared looking not at all unlike like Dr. Twelve. Their skin and hair shined with an oily but clean-looking sheen. They hauled a big oaken chest

shackled in iron.

Rosalie asked the prisoner, "Who are they?"

"No idea."

Someone in front of them turned and said, "They're from IT."

Another of the Ascendant asked, "What's IT?"

"You know, they handle the computers and stuff."

The two black men opened the chest and passed out crowns. One said, "Take one and pass it back."

The other said, "Just hold it. Don't put them on yet."

The prisoner and Rosalie passed them back as they came to them. The crown was very thin like a tiara but with a large square jewel set in the forehead. When everyone behind them had one, the prisoner and Rosalie took their own. The prisoner offered his to Rosalie and said, "Will you marry me?"

Rosalie laughed and told him to be quiet.

The black men finished handing out the crowns. They pulled a heavy satchel from the chest and held it high in the air. "We will choose by lottery whose life to watch first."

Rosalie whispered, "Oh! It's like Harry Potter."

Bosun Bicklesworth patted the bottom of the satchel as if to mix up the contents. Then he drew a name. "Soon-Jang?"

Soon-Jang said, "That's me."

One of the black men pulled a big ruby from the chest and told them to pass it to Soon-Jang. The oddly black-clad technician said, "Do you see how it goes on there?"

The ruby was set in gold, and there was a stud that fit a slot above the jewel on his crown. Soon-Jang said, "Yes, it fits."

The technician said, "Ok, now just you—"

The other black man interrupted the first. He said, "Just Soon-Jang now, the rest of you wait."

The first one continued, "Yes, only him." Then he said, "Only you. Please put the crown on your head."

Soon-Jang did, and the two men and the bosun looked at the mizzen sail. "Excellent," one of them said. They took some more jewels from the chest and began to arrange them

around the base of the mizzen mast, glancing toward the sail.

“Fantastic,” the other one said.

The lead technician took a jug from the chest and spilled the contents on the jewels around the base of the mizzen mast. The empty sail began to glow. He said, “Ok, now the rest of you can put your crowns on.”

Way down deep—The Sea Star was in the deep water by then—a big octopus felt the energy of those jewels pressed to the Ascendant’s foreheads, so it began swimming from the depths toward The Sea Star.

The viewing started. Baby Soon-Jang opened his eyes for the first time, and what he saw was on the sail. Soon-Jang died when he was thirty-four, killed by his own brother. He took his last breath, and the glowing image on the sail faded away. Five Ascendant had nodded off while they watched and were gone. The bosun said it was an average attrition rate, and he reported it to the captain. The Ascendant were hungry for the first time since candle light first fell on baby Soon-Jang’s newborn eyes more than thirty years ago. The two IT guys collected the jewels from around the mast. They collected the crowns and told the Ascendant to head to the galley. Most of them hadn’t seen the galley and were surprised to be sent belowdecks.

In the galley, they sat eight to a table. Bicklesworth told them to discuss what they’d seen. Soon-Jang sat with his head in his hands. Viewing his life in the way it was projected onto the sail showed much context of which he had been unaware during his life on Earth. It seemed like a dream. His brother was working for the Chinese governor the whole time. It was almost incomprehensible. He thought, *For such a small amount of money!*

They went back to the poopdeck and watched another one. Ishikawa lived to be sixty. He died in a sword fight. Then they watched another one. They watched some more, each one a tale of betrayal and murder. Then they watched Sfethen’s life which was fantastic and amazing. He had been a king. After

his viewing, the other Ascendant called him King Sfethen. They went to the galley to eat and discuss what they'd seen.

Rosalie and the prisoner sat together as they always did. Rosalie said to him, "I don't know what I'm going to do after you all watch my life, love."

The prisoner said, "You'll be fine."

She looked around at a dozen eight-man tables, mostly full. "I mean... we're about a tenth over and..." She put her hands over her face.

"It's ok, baby," the prisoner said to her.

"No, you don't understand. I'm so different than them, than you." Rosalie shook her fists and bemoaned her chagrin. "Oh, what to do?!"

"How do you know you're different than me? My life could be just like yours." In all his years on *The Sea Star*, the prisoner never remembered his life.

She began to sob softly. "No. Just no."

The prisoner consoled her. Ben-Khan was sitting at their table, and he told Rosalie to cheer up. "Was Sfethen's life the same?"

Rosalie admitted it was not.

Ben-Khan said, "No, it wasn't. And how about when King Sfethen sunk that dagger into Archerole's heart? Was that the greatest feeling you ever felt or what?"

Daria, who was also seated with them, said, "Oh my God! Yes! I don't think I've ever hated someone so much in my life. That was one evil bastard." She halfway meant it. She wasn't thinking about her own murderer, and, even considering him, her most-hated superlative would change over the next few viewings. There were greater evils than the evil in Archerole's heart. Greater evils by far.

Rosalie had taken no pleasure in seeing that man die.

The prisoner said, somehow vocalizing though his vocal chords were long gone, "I know! When I saw the blood start to bubble at his lips, I knew he was done for. Man, I hated that guy."

A man sitting at King Sfethen's table stood and proposed a toast. They toasted him, and everyone cheered. They asked Sfethen questions, and they were all glad to have a nice story. Usually the galley was a grim place for the Ascendant on The Sea Star. The viewing was a dark time.

They went abovedecks and sat behind the mizzen mast again. Bicklesworth pulled a name from the satchel held by the two black men: Three Seven DD, who liked to be called Thirtysseven Double D, and JRR Zero, who liked to be called Jar-row.

The bosun called out, "Richard."

Richard was born in Nebraska in 1941. He moved to Chicago for college and lived there the rest of his days. He didn't know it, but the loft he rented in his freshman year was near the building where H.H. Holmes had run his torture hotel. Nineteenth century aristocrats and other perverts from around the world visited Chicago where they paid to torture in the torture chambers hidden in Holmes' building. The historical record of the crimes showed that Holmes himself was behind it all, but, in truth, he was only the henchman for a cult that had set up a lodge in Chicago. By the time Richard moved to Chicago, the torture hotel had moved to New Orleans, but the lodge was still in Chicago, and it had grown. The hotel in New Orleans was the inspiration for The Animals' song The House of the Rising Sun. The wailing in that song wasn't the singer's voice, it was a recording of a man being cooked to death. It was what Hank McCoy called a pain song in a song of his own.

Walking to class in the spring semester of his freshman year, Richard was spotted on the street by Malcor. Malcor was his name at the lodge, Paul Feral was his legal name with respect to the United States of America Corporation. Malcor saw the glow of the energy that would eventually lead to Richard's ascendancy, and he reported it to his superiors at the lodge. The lodge watched Richard from afar all through that year and the next.

When they were satisfied that he was just some man alone

filled with an energy no one had ever noticed, they conspired to take it from him. At the lodge one night, Malcor proposed to kidnap Richard. Malcor said, "He walks home the same way every night. We should snatch him!"

Malcor's father, Bron Feral, whose name in the lodge was Sphinctor, and whose parents were ignorant and had never heard the word sphincter in their miserable lives, had another idea. Money had been tight. The Feral family were very well to do when the hotel was in Chicago, but the finances had been steadily drained over the decades. By the time Malcor spotted Richard, all the reasonably sellable assets had been sold. They were still nearly millionaires, but the Ferals were millionaires no longer. Their income and the lodge's income weren't where they were wanted to be, and Sphinctor sought to improve that. He said, "You say this feller's real smart?"

Malcor said, "Yes, sir. He's been acing all his classes. His professors think real highly of him." Richard was studying finance and business management.

Sphinctor said, "How about we milk him?"

Malcor said, "Yes, sir. I can get him tomorrow night." He thought his father meant to milk that magic energy out of his body on a cutting board like they did with the poor folk who wandered too far from home in south Chicago. There was hardly any energy to milk in most of those paupers, but the lodge enjoyed it just the same. Children always had some energy, even if it was meager. Adults not so much, but the sadists at the lodge still liked the torture even when there was no energy to steal.

Sphinctor said, "No, son. How about we milk him slow? For his life and his money." Sphinctor explained his plan, and the lodge voted in favor of it.

A few weeks later, Malcor introduced himself to Richard. He said, "I'm Paul," and that he was in Richard's accounting class but had dropped it. "I remember you were a real hotshot. The prof loved you." Richard was flattered and agreed to tutor Paul for a small fee. So, Richard's relationship with the Ferals



began. After he graduated, Bron Feral got Richard a job at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. Richard married two years later, and Malcor was the best man at his wedding. Richard became a very successful trader and quite rich. Richard grew to think of Paul as his best and oldest friend.

Richard told Paul about a real estate deal he'd been working on that had finally closed. He'd netted nearly a million dollars. Malcor brought it to the lodge, and they decided Richard was ripe. They kidnapped Richard's daughter and sent a ransom note with her foot. They made sure Malcor was with Richard when he got it. Richard, apoplectic, wailed his agony.

The note said not to call the authorities, but Richard said to Malcor, "I have to call the police."

Malcor said, "Maybe my father can help."

Richard knew Paul's father was some kind of mafia figure but had never really developed a relationship with the man. He said, "Do you think so?"

Malcor said, "It couldn't hurt to try." Malcor drove Richard to Sphinctor's home where the daughter was held. Sphinctor assured Richard that he had heard of the kidnap gang and that the best thing to do was to pay.

Richard wept, and Malcor consoled him in the living room of Sphinctor's baroque home. Malcor winked at his father. Sphinctor opened the door to the dining room so that Victoria could see her father from where she was strapped to the board and gagged. She spasmed and shook and thrashed to get her father's attention, but it was to no avail. Sphinctor pulled out his penis and testicles behind Richard's back. He shook them at the girl. She was ten years old.

Though the girl was totally silent restrained as she was, Richard felt something and began to turn. Paul grabbed him by the shoulders and stopped him. He said, "You have to be strong now." Sphinctor put his private parts away and closed the door to the dining room. Malcor said, "We're going to get through this."

Richard paid. It more than doubled the Ferals' coffers.

They killed the girl. They skinned her alive, cut off her arms and legs, and sewed her face to a sow's behind. When she finally died, they ate her. Malcor ate her liver and said, "Mmmm, I love fois gras."

Years later, they did it to Richard again with his other daughter. Sphinctor had died by that time, and Malcor was running the Chicago lodge. Then Richard became a widower and a hermit seeing no one except his old friend Paul whose happy life Richard was glad to hear about from time to time. Then Richard died of old age. Malcor never took Richard because he thought his energy had faded. Really, it was only hidden behind the pain. Then the glowing image on The Sea Star's broad mizzen sail faded away after seventy years. The Ascendant were in a somber state in the galley after that. No one said anything. Richard never knew it was Paul.

Richard was sick and didn't eat anything. Bicklesworth told him he should eat, and Richard told him he didn't want to.

The bosun said, "Richard, this cult is known to us. Aye, we fight them. We fight them and likely you will too once we're to Exland. Garr, hear you me." Richard left the galley and went abovedecks. The bosun told the others to discuss what they'd seen.

Rosalie said to the prisoner, "I don't know why I'm even here, love. My life was so... different." She thought about Ben and the mountains.

The prisoner said, "It'll be ok, baby. We're all here for a reason." She laid her head down on the table and cried.

They watched another and another. The third life after Richard's was Daria's. She was burned at the stake as a witch at the age of twenty-nine. Unlike Rosalie, she was not one. The shaman was merely angry that Daria hadn't taken to his advances. The mizzen sails glowed with flames, and they all heard Daria's cries and screams fade away as she burned to death. Then the glow of fire on the sail faded, and the Ascendant began the march back to the galley.

Rosalie and the prisoner stood on the poopdeck waiting for

the single file line to descend onto the quarterdeck and then the waist where was the hatch leading below. Two great tentacles came over The Sea Star's port side and two came over the starboard side. The Ascendant didn't see, but the same happened on The Sea Star's second hull. The orgulous octopus twisted The Sea Star. The crossbeams connecting the hulls splintered and broke. Some of the Ascendant and crew were thrown into the sea, but some were not so lucky. They were thrown into the void that the two hulls skirted, lost forever. The callous creature crushed, and the keel cracked. Then it smashed the two hulls together, and The Sea Star was destroyed.

# 07

SANDY waves slowly rolled up the sea shore and slowly rolled out again. The prisoner's eyes didn't open exactly because he didn't have any, but his mind's eye came online. He wanted to squint his non-existent eyes but could not. He tried to shade his face with his hand, but it didn't provide much shade since it was only bones. The prisoner's other hand was stuck in the beach sand. He was mostly sunken into the beach where the sun glared down on him from its position at high noon. He was stuck fast: just a skull, an arm, and some ribs sticking out of the sand, baking in the sun.

Another wave broke and crashed up the beach, and he watched it come toward his face. The cold water splashed his face, and he remembered everything. He remembered waking up on The Sea Star and the curious crew. He remembered the viewings. He remembered his amnesia which remained. He remembered Rosalie and heard her calling his name.

"Love?," she called. "Love?"

The prisoner yelled, "Rosalie!"

"Love!"

With an effort, he freed himself from the sand. In the rush of non-existent adrenaline, the weight of the sand was like nothing to him. His rags were lost, and his bones gleamed in the sun as Rosalie leaped into his open arms.

“Ouch,” she said. His bones were very hard.

Lefty said, “Quiet thurr, ye. Who knows what’s about? Aye, who knows?” Lefty’s peg leg was splintered, and he was hobbling along with a crutch made from a branch. It was sinking into the sand, and he wasn’t getting along too well when he tripped and fell. The prisoner offered Lefty his hand, but Lefty sunk his hook into the prisoner’s airy ribcage and got back to his foot like that.

“Thanky,” Lefty said. “Pull ‘em bodies from the sea, would ya?”

The prisoner almost looked at the bodies. Instead, the seraph caught his eye. Down the shore was a monolithic statue like a griffin. Extending into the tide only so far that it was exposed in the draw of the water, a lion’s body sat on a massive rectangular plinth. At the lion’s shoulders, a woman’s hips began, her breasts facing the sea. The wings on her back rested on the back of the lion, and her stone face was very high in the air.

Rosalie said, “Oh my.”

The prisoner said, “No kidding.” Up and down the beach, the seraphim lined the water. Behind the first was another, slightly bluer and much smaller in the distance. The line of wonderfully chesty monoliths ran all the way to the horizon, each one seeming smaller and bluer than the ones in front of it as they faded away like mountain ridges in the distance.

The beach was very broad and gently sloping. Past the tide line, there was jungle. The terrain was steeper there. It quickly rose along the rainforested mountainside. Here and there, stark cliffs of bare stone broke through the climbing canopy. Clouds blew in from the sea and pushed up the cliffs’ faces like spilled milk rising to heaven.

Lefty said, “Get them bodies, will ya?”

The prisoner said, “No, that’s ok.” He and Rosalie went to sit by the trees. The prisoner’s bony feet sank far into the sand like Lefty’s crutch, but he was a lot stronger than old Lefty.

On the beach were about forty Ascendant. The officer

corps was mostly assembled on the quarterdeck when The Sea Star was destroyed. They had been thrown into sea and not the void, and they were on the beach too. About thirty able seamen and petty officers were also on the beach. Twelve was there with four other red-suited men that the prisoner had never seen. They argued loudly with five black-suited men including Jarrow and Thirtyseven Double D.

The officers sat in a circle near the tree line. When the prisoner and Rosalie tried to sit down within earshot, the bosun told them, "Sit a little further down, would ye?," so they walked to the first seraph and sat in its thin lip of high noon shade. The entire stoneworks was very tall.

The prisoner judged the sun and said to Rosalie, "This shadow makes perfect sense to me." She laughed and said she loved him. They watched the milieu and counted who was there and who wasn't. King Sfethen came out of the jungle dragging a dead animal like a wolfish boar.

Rosalie said, "What is that thing? A pig-wolf?"

The prisoner said, "Beats me."

The enlisted sailors cheered when they saw the animal. Unlike the Ascendant that could sit for decades without eating, the sailors needed to eat. The officers took note, and Captain Atlas adjourned the officer's meeting. A driftwood fire was built. Then they gutted the pig-wolf and roasted it on a spit.

Bicklesworth walked among the surviving Ascendant and advised them to eat. "That sun in the sky, yarr up tharr, ye be hungry soon enough, mark 'em words. Ain't at sea no more, narr. Aye."

The cooking was done in the evening, and they all ate their fill from the beast. Sfethen told them, "No sooner than I'd copped a squat when I heard a powerful rustle in the brush. In a moment, I were set upon by yonder fell beast." He took a greedy bite from the rib he was holding. The delicious grease smeared his beard where it glistened in the firelight. He told them how he jumped on its back when it charged, and that he choked it to death. Incredible as Sfethen's account was, they

had all watched his life on the mizzen sail and knew his warrior's mettle.

Sfethen said, "He lunged at me with that toothy maw all agape, but I punched him square in the nose 'fore those chompers could find their purchase." Then he said, "Aye, I did."

Richard said, "Like when you escaped the dragon's nest?"

Sfethen said, "Fairly so, aye."

Able Seaman Carl, who had not been privy to the viewing, and who was the only survivor on the beach aboard the second hull during the attack, said, "A dragon? Do tell us your tale, master King Sfethen." The other sailing men cheered for the dragon story, and there was even enthusiasm from the officers. Fátima cheered too, and the other Ascendant encouraged him. Sfethen was a modest man, but he knew his story was the only happy one among those viewed, so he told the story, and then the sun set.

The bosun said, "Don't worry 'bout sleepin' 'ere. Get some rest." The first yawn was contagious, and the Ascendant slept for the first time in a long time. The Guildsmen spoke late into the night.

In the morning, the bosun rounded up the Ascendant who were in good cheer and well rested of pleasant dreams. "Able Seaman Carl tells us he thinks the third hull survived so we're going to wait for a rescue."

"What third hull?" It was the question on the collective Ascendant mind, but the prisoner was the one to ask it.

"Ye oldie Sea Star were a trimaran, not a catamaran. Narr, thurr be three hulls tharr, aye," the bosun said.

"I didn't see a third hull when I went over the side." Although the prisoner was the only one among them who couldn't remember boarding at the Port of Higher Calls, the images from Rosalie's recounting were the oldest in his mind. He said, "Where was the third hull at the Port of High Calls then? There were just two hulls, one in the water and one in the air."

“Narr, narr, narr,” the bosun said. “Ye just couldn’t see ‘er third ‘ull cuz she were up in space ‘hind ‘er second ‘ull’s keel.”

The prisoner thought that made sense, but the burly bosun went on. “D’ye think the wind is gonna lift an entire ship ‘igh as a kite wi’out blowin’ the likes o’ ye away?” He waved his hands at them. “I mean, come on, Bonesy. What kind of sense would that make?,” he said as he winked at the prisoner. “T’woudn’t make no sense at all now, t’would it? T’woodie twood twiddle, narr!”

“Narr,” the prisoner agreed.

The bosun said, “So best stay outta the jungle. Young master Sfethen were lucky, but the rest o’ ye’d be likely gored ‘n’ dead.”

Around noon that day, the sails of The Sea Star’s third hull shimmered and solidified at the sea’s singular horizon. The third hull launched skiffs, and Lieutenant Commander Mancuso was the first to jump into the water and tromp up the beach. Everyone was evacuated, and they climbed the net thrown over the side of the big broad hull before they hauled the skiffs up with ropes and pulleys. With all aboard, The Sea Star’s third hull rocked back and forth, and side to side.

“Haul anchor,” the captain said.

“Haul anchor. Aye, Captain,” Mancuso said. “Haul anchor!,” he yelled.

Tentacles enveloped the ship. They ripped the sails and wrecked the rigging, but due to the shallow depth of the coastal sea, the second octopus was much smaller and not strong enough to crush the hull outright.

The captain yelled, “Battle stations!,” and his first mate blew the battle horn. All across The Sea Star’s topdecks—four of them, there was no waist deck on the smaller third hull—the Guild sailors chopped at the tentacles with their swords. Many sailors died. The tentacles bashed and squeezed them to death, and with its sucker pads it ripped out their guts.

The bosun used his broad scimitar to hack a tentacle as he led the Ascendant belowdecks.



The captain cried, “Abandon ship!”

Mancuso said, “Bandon ship! Aye, Captain!” and he blew the whistle.

The bosun herded the Ascendant through the hatch on the main deck when he heard the whistle. *Ab, fuark*, he thought.

Daria ran toward the prisoner and Rosalie, but the octopus put the smallest sucker pad at the tip of its tentacle on the side her face. They saw her eyes sink into her skull as the octopus slurped her brains out through her ear.

Belowdecks, the bosun pulled a lever, and a hidden hatch opened. He said, “Bandon ship, down ye go! Aye, quicker now! Yarr!”

The hatch opened into a concrete stairwell with stairs made from diamond plate steel. A klaxon blared below. The prisoner looked down the well and saw more than a dozen loops of stairs descending far below where he would have placed the bottom of the ship. Six floors down, the prisoner noticed the painted texture of the cinder block masonry framing the stairs. The *déjà vu* hit him hard, but Rosalie also hit him hard when she shoved him forward. She said, “Hurry!” and the moment was gone.

At the bottom of the stairwell, they passed through another hatch like a nuclear bank vault. The room beyond would have reminded the prisoner of the bridge set on *Star Trek*, but he had no memory of such things. The Ascendant hurried into the room, and behind them the Guildsmen. When the captain came through, he said, “Let’s get the heck outta here!”

Thirtyseven Double D said, “Get the heck out of here, aye, Captain.” He typed something on his keyboard, clickity clack, and hit enter. The enter key clicked.

The derealization engine on The Sea Star’s third hull’s escape pod misfired, and its passengers’ common thread of reality frayed. The craft shook violently. An overhead cable tray collapsed spilling sparks across the room. The prisoner was calm and ready to accept whatever fate would come. Rosalie sat next to him squeezing her knees to her chest and keeping

her head down. A panel popped off the wall and sprayed more sparks that made the prisoner cringe in pain. The sparks burned his arm. He couldn't understand the sight of living flesh, but then he noticed he was fully healed, head to toe.

He put his hand on Rosalie's. "Baby."

*Tssssk!* A crack ripped through the big forward monitor that had nearly everyone's attention.

The prisoner's unfamiliar touch surprised Rosalie. She was disturbed by the unfamiliar man—mostly unfamiliar, for some reason she did recognize something about him—saying her name in Love's voice.

"Baby," he said again.

"Oh my God!," she said.

They both stood up, him naked in full sight of everyone. The violent attack continued. The ship shook. Another panel exploded in the escape pod. It caught fire and began to fill the room with smoke. The ship lurched again. The prisoner and Rosalie fell to the ground.

The prisoner rolled on top of her and kissed her. The ship shook again, and a panel exploded. The shrapnel tore an Ascendant woman apart and splattered her about. When the ship shook even more violently, the prisoner and Rosalie were thrown to their feet. The attack jostled the ship, and a closet door near them swung open. Rosalie said to Love, "Take me."

In the closet, the prisoner kissed Rosalie, and she jumped around his waist. He kissed her again, tore open her buttoned blouse, and buried his face in her ample fullness. Rosalie turned around, and he helped her get her pants down. He took her from behind. Her slick warmth seduced him. He pounded her from behind, and, when she moaned, he yanked a handful of her wavy red locks. She moaned even more. The ship lurched, and the flash of another explosion filled the closet. The prisoner put his hands on her back and pushed her down. She grabbed her ankles, and he hit it like that. He put his hands on her hips and pushed her down to the ground. She got on all fours, but the prisoner pushed her down again. She got on

her elbows, but the prisoner pushed her down again until her face was on the deck.

Rosalie said, "Take me," and he did.

The prisoner put the pressure on Rosalie hard and fast until she felt the only orgasm a man would ever give her building deep inside. The fire in the room, and the screaming of the women, and the barking of the men outside didn't disturb her at all as she came closer to coming.

Rosalie said, "Hnnng! Oh my God! Oh my God!" She said, "Harder," and the prisoner did hit it harder. He took her well. She felt it getting closer as he slapped against her. Her womanly wetness was like a waterfall.

He felt his own orgasm coming and closed his eyes. He saw a double helix of white fire rise and spin between them. The energy danced in his mind, half from her and half from him. The captain gave the order to fire the derealization engine again. Another explosion lurched the ship, and the deck dropped out from underneath them. The engine fired in that moment of weightlessness. In that moment, the prisoner and Rosalie were in climax together. Then the prisoner saw the twirling energies untwirl. His energy formed a dragon, and hers a phoenix. In a million, million, million universes where Rosalie was known, it was the only time a man ever brought her all the way. The dragon locked claws with the phoenix against the starry sky, and he filled the woman he loved with his seed.

The phoenix and the dragon swam and flew as the waves of ecstasy overcame them. He clutched Rosalie's hips even tighter, but she wasn't there. There was only the ecstasy. Wave after wave of orgasmic ecstasy washed over him for what seemed like an eternity, and he became lost in it. Everything about the moment was perfect... save one thing.

*Rosalie?*

# 08

MANY died on the third hull. A few were thrown into the water where they made it to shore. Everyone washed up on the shore that had made it down to the escape pod. Everyone except the prisoner. Rosalie called for him all day. “My love, my love! Where are you?”

She searched for a long time, but there was no fourth hull, and the captain told them not to expect rescue.

“Love!” she cried in vain.

In Rosalie’s mourning, King Sfethen killed another pig-wolf. Doctor Twelve told them that since there was no good prospect of getting to a medical facility, they should not consider eating the pig-wolves as a long-term dietary solution. Twelve crushed the big pig-wolf’s skull and explained the brain worms.

King Sfethen said, “Why would you even let us eat this once?”

Dr. Twelve told them it was settled science that brain worms’ worst symptoms were intergenerational. He said all short-term exposures could be treated and fully mitigated with Guild medicine that the good doctor called, “pirate medicine.”

King Sfethen disagreed. He told the red man to shut up, and then he walked away. He became very angry but soon got over it.

Twelve said behind him, “We usually don’t give the brain worm speech until we get to Exland.”

One of the black-suited men from the third hull addressed them. The red and orange fire hues glimmered on his black body suit long after the sun went down. He said, “My name is Jim Bobson, and we have a big problem.” Everyone knew it, but it was the first time since landing on the beach that they discussed it as a group. It seemed like a fell omen that one of the IT guys brought it up instead of one of the regular officers. Jim Bobson said, “There was an error writing the log file when we ran the derealization engine.”

The sailors grumbled.

“Garr!”

“Flarr!!!”

Angry again, Sfethen kicked over the spit roast he’d rigged.

The doctor said something about feasibility to which Jim Bobson said, “We can’t recompile the core code from the mobile units.” Most of the Ascendant didn’t know what a log file was, but an error was plain enough. So was *can’t*.

Sfethen bellowed, “What does it mean?”

Jim Bobson said, “Sir, that’s what I’ve decided to address the captain with this evening. I will go over there in one moment. Based on my preliminary examination of the log file fragments, I think we should divert to a side mission. We should climb over this mountain and seed a society which will get us to the point where we can build a blast furnace. Then we can melt the detectonium we’ve salvaged from the wreckage and forge the quantum compass. Then, be our grandchildren’s grandchildren strong enough,” it was the first time Rosalie’s mind really left the prisoner when she wondered if the IT crew were robots, “and if they remember our teachings, then they can take a heading and make their way back to Exland.”

Able Seaman Curtis said, “Yarr, frankly it means we don’t know what to do here because Captain Atlas is never going to go for a side mission.” At the scene of the second shipwreck,

unlike the first, wreckage washed ashore and bobbed in the surf.

On the second day, the captain spotted The Sea Star's navigation wheel when it rode down the side of a swell at the end of his vision. He scanned the sea from an outcrop above the trees and then swam to the wheel. The captain floated on it as he paddled back to shore. The captain and the officers sat near the overly massive ironwood wheel when Jim Bobson walked over to them. As was his duty, Jim Bobson informed the captain of his findings and gave his technical recommendation based on his analysis of the fragments of the derealization engine's log file.

The captain said, "No way. We're not doing that. We needa finda shipwright. That'll be faster. Dismissed."

Jim Bobson returned to the group of survivors ex the other officers and told them what the captain said. "The captain said, 'No,' so... captain's orders."

"How long do you think your side mission would take?"

Jim Bobson said, "We might find what we need right over this ridge, but we should plan to get our grandchildren's grandchildren back to Exland on a timescale of between a few centuries, depends on if there's good mining on the land, and forty thousand years." Their time on The Sea Star had already outlasted their living lives many times over, but forty millennia were much longer still.

An Ascendant woman asked, "How long does the captain think his way will take?"

Jim Bobson said, "I don't know."

Jim Bobson further did not know a secret known to all Guild captains. No wrecked crew had ever been found on the Negative Fractal Field (wherein are the Port of Higher Calls and Exland) which reported success after diverting to a side mission. The Guild Science Directorate had a projection for the average number of successful side missions. It was very small but theoretically non-negligible across the entire fleet of

ships, each with a captain sailing for what seemed like an eternity. The Guild Navy reported crews returning from side missions at the rate predicted by the directorate, but 100 percent of those crews were black ops shadow crews reassigned from the regular navy by the admiralty. For that reason, the captain knew to distrust Jim Bobson's evaluation: Jim Bobson's models were wrong. The captain felt badly, but he was sworn to secrecy and couldn't tell Jim Bobson the truth. He felt like a scoundrel because the Guild was supposed to be about virtue and honesty, and he had to go against his chief science officer's recommendation in front of his men even when he himself had lied to Jim Bobson about side missions. The Guild was supposed to be about honesty, and, besides, the captain thought the number of secretly designated side mission crews was getting too high.

After Jim Bobson went back to the other campfire, the captain told his officers, "We needa finda shipwright."

# 09

THE sailors expressed their sadnesses at the loss of The Sea Star. Bosun Bicklesworth stood with his hand on his heart as if to pontificate. He said, “Lo! She were a good ship and true. Yardy yarr yarr!!!”

The other sailors answered in chorus, “Yarr!!! And a good ship were she!”

The bosun sat. The bosun’s mate, Mr. Boatswain, stood. His quarters and billet were mostly on the third hull. He said, “Guild destroy all brain worms.”

“Guild destroy all brain worms!!!”

Mr. Boatswain sat, and Lefty stood. “Me own leg, cleaved from ‘er very deck planks. Yarr, she were!” Lefty waggled his splintered peg leg. There was laughter, but it was filled with lament.

Jim Bobson interrupted the reverie. He said, “Gentlemen, please. I’ll not interfere with your remembrance, but if you’ll hold it later, I’d be much obliged.” They were only reminiscing in the hot tropical sun, and they obliged him. Jim Bobson said, “Our prime directive is to get these Ascendant to Exland, and we need to get that blast furnace set up. I’m going to recommend to the captain that we split up.” Jim Bobson’s plan for a side mission was to start having children who would eventually form a society advanced enough to build a blast furnace



capable of liquefying detectonium.

Jim Bobson approached the officer's bivy that was organized around The Sea Star's salvaged wheel. He pleaded, "Captain, at least send some of us to go start working on the blast furnace."

The captain agreed. He said, "Jim Bobson, you lead an exploratory party inland to search for good mining terrain. We'll head up the coast and look for a shipwright." Then the captain gave special orders. "If you find anyone, you have to send a messenger back to us. Even if you're only two Guildsmen left, one of you has to come back and tell us where."

"Aye, captain," the chief science officer said.

"Listen to me, Jim Bobson. Even if there's only one Guildsman left, you have to abandon the side mission and come search for us. We'll only head up the coast." The captain pointed. "If we find a shipwright, we'll leave instructions for you."

"Aye, captain."

The captain didn't know if Jim Bobson would stick to it or not. He felt guilty because the disagreement was over his own lie. Push come to shove, Jim Bobson was going to be the captain of the side mission.

Jim Bobson went with a party that tried to penetrate the jungle. Despite their efforts, they could never crest or even approach the ridgeline at the top of the steep range upon whose foothills the beach was set. The slope always got too steep, and the mist from the clouds made the mud too slick. The jungle was impenetrable. The two parties went up the coast for very many years, but Jim Bobson's party had no climbing gear for the cliffs, and they could never get far inland before the way became impassable. Jim Bobson traveled with the captain, always probing the jungle, but he never got more than a few weeks or a month from the beach before the impassibility sent them back to another rendezvous with the captain. As the Bobson party made their way, the captain marched

everyday with the big ironwood wheel on his enormous shoulders. He carried it all the way down, and, later, when they came back, he carried it all the way back again. It was very heavy.

There was no side mission. There was no way inland. The Bobson party was dissolved after two climbing deaths. They all marched down the beach and counted the seraphim to record how far they'd come or gone. Each seraph was different though all were similar. Each was a winged woman set on a lion's shoulders set on a megalithic plinth, but small features changed and marked the party's journey.

The Sea Star's survivors came to one with spread wings instead of folded wings, and they marveled at the huge stone-works high above. By that time, the party had come to consensus that the best course of action was to keep heading up the beach. On The Sea Star, the changing seasons on the mizzen sail marked time well enough. On the beach, every day was the same, so the swarthy sweep of the griffinic seraph's granite wings was big news for them. The wind came from the sea and blew onto the mountain every day. It always blew the same. The tide neither ebbed nor flowed. It only rolled.

Camped under the novel seraph, Ben-Khan closely examined the grains of beach sand. He saw upon very close inspection, as did they all, that each grain was a platonic solid, geometrically perfect. Like the infinitude of other grains of sand that were the beach, the grains weren't simple rock chaff. Each was a beautiful petrified snowflake of entropy, but Ben-Khan had never heard of entropy by the time he died in 1233 AD. Ben-Khan thought it seemed like there were more tetrahedrons in the sand near the swept-wing seraph than further back. Malika told him it seemed about the same to her.

Fátima told Ben-Khan, "You might be onto something there."

When the captain looked, he said, "I don't see a difference."

Bosun Bicklesworth examined the skew of the shapes in the sand. He said, "Yarr, reckon so. Aye, we do. Yarr hurdy durr, don't it? Eh, mate?"

Ben-Khan had been walking up the beach naked for years. After their clothes disintegrated, most of them made clothes from the leaves and fronds, but Ben-Khan was commando all the way with his dark skin baking every day in the sun. As he addressed them, his big bronze body stood in contrast to the white froth on the blue-green waves. He said, "We can't keep doing this forever. You want to say, 'We're making progress. This seraph is different.' What will you say a long time from now when you've learned every ten thousandth thing has spread wings, or every billionth?"

Rosalie said, "How long have we been here?," but no one could tell her.

Long before, The Sea Star's survivors had noted that the game trail where they wrecked was the only inroad to the continent that they'd seen across more than five thousand seraphim. The game trail was where King Sfethen went to relieve himself when the pig-wolf attacked, and where he hunted a second one later. Jim Bobson investigated the trail and found it was only a long loop around in the jungle. Eating pig-wolves turned out not to be an issue on the beach. They never saw another once they began to walk. They ate fish and fruits which were plentiful, and sometimes the jungle gave them nuts. They also ate a lot of kelp.

Ben-Khan convinced the captain that the group should split up. The captain thought they should go back and study the game trail. Being ashore, the captain called for a vote. In the bickering over whether or not to split, it was suggested that one group could stay in the middle to watch for passersby. The survivors voted not to split into two groups, but when they voted to split into three, the motion carried.

Able Seaman Curtis suggested a fourth group. He said, "We can march out into the sea." He referred to the four points of the classical compass and a possible fourth group.

Mr. Black said, "Shut it, swabbie."

Able Seaman Curtis said, "There's only four ways and that's one of them."

Mr. Black said, “You want to drown? Go ahead.”

Able Seaman Curtis thought he wouldn’t drown if he marched straight into the water. They didn’t find one drowned body among the two attacks. The bodies they found were dead of dismemberment and trauma, not drowning. Curtis thought about it but did not want to test his luck. He’d play it safe and stick with the captain.

The captain had already decided against ordering someone to march into the sea for diagnostic purposes. The Sea Star’s former first officer Lieutenant Commander Mancuso had advised the captain to send one man because they did not find even one drowned body, and they should be sure. The captain had said, “Not today.”

On the day of the vote, the captain looked at Able Seaman Curtis to see if he was going to volunteer for a solitary fourth group. He did not, and the captain delayed his own order for another day. So, one group returned to the game trail, one group continued down the beach encouraged by the variation of the seraphim, and another group stayed put, resigned to let fate find them with no further searching.

Lefty warned them against staying put. He said, “‘Ternity be long and far. Yarr, she do.”

One of the lazy, third-group Ascendant said, “Why couldn’t I just fall asleep on The Sea Star?”

# 10

VOLUNTEERS formed the group that would stay near the seraph with sweeping wings. Among the two beachcombing groups, the captain ordered that they should be formed by fate, so lots were cast. The Ascendant men to go back to the game trail were Richard, Eduardo, Bruce, Kong, Norbert, Muhammad who they called Big Moe to distinguish him from the other Muhammad that kept going down the beach, Azzam, and King Sfethen. The Ascendant women with them were Rosalie, Fátima, Anne, Trang, Alexandra, Yessica, Maria, Yulia, Naomi, Raphaela, Zohra, Marine, Rebekkah, Carol, Veronica, and Urania. Captain Atlas went back to the game trail, and so did Bosun Bicklesworth. The other Guild Navy officers in that group were Ensign First Class Fernando and Ensign Thierry. There were about ten able seamen and petty officers as well, most of them from the third hull. (Most of the enlisted men on the first and second hulls held to their stations and died in the first attack.) Jarrow and Thirtyseven Double D went back to the game trail. Jim Bobson (the only other black-suited man) and Dr. Twelve (the only remaining red-suited man) went further down the beach.

The returning group counted down more than five thousand seraphim. When they were back to the where they started, they searched for the game trail. The living jungle had

grown and changed, and wherever the trail had been was replaced by the self-similar pattern of the jungle. There was no game trail. Wherever it had been was long overgrown. The captain said, "We should keep going in this direction," and they did. Behind the next seraph was a cobbled road leading up a narrow canyon.

The captain said, "Finally."

Rosalie was glad. Fátima had been getting on her nerves for years. Something about the woman just got underneath her skin and wouldn't go away, so she was very glad for a change of scenery. She and Fátima even shared their elation as the group cheered and celebrated. The captain sent Petty Officers Zorpozomzom and Rick back with four able seamen to tell the waiters of the road. The captain said, "Tell Lieutenant Commander Mancuso that we've found a road," and so the petty officers would tell the waiters on the way to catch the other group many more years further gone.

On the road, Jarrow said how lucky they were. "Whoever cut these cobblestones is sure to have a blast furnace." He pulled the leather cord at his heart and admired the smallish nugget of detectonium. "If I can forge the quantum compass, we'll be back in Exland in no time." It wasn't true. Among all the parallel universes where Jarrow did find his furnace, he never survived to fully forge the compass. However, Jarrow was on a different road that *did* lead back to the Guild, though he never did get the compass together and would not personally make it back to Exland. It was only along one singular thread of immutable reality that any from The Sea Star made it back to headquarters, but it's business as usual when Guild business unfolds on singular timelines. Looking at his nugget, Jarrow said, "Oh, yes. Quite indeed."

Richard asked Jarrow, "What does the quantum compass do?"

Jarrow gave Richard physics lectures for most of two days as they walked up the canyon next to a thin stream. Before

they came to the waterfall at the end, the road began switchbacks up the canyon wall, and the Guildsmen ascended with the Ascendant. They climbed switchbacks for three days. Then they headed up the coast again but at a much higher altitude. When the clouds didn't shroud them, they could see the seraphim on the beach below through the gaps in the canopy. The captain's party passed four seraphim on the high road—what Braido Goran called the Coast Road—and came to another waterfall where the road turned inland. They descended into the valley. It was the first leg of road in descent, and they were glad of the progress. They skirted the large lake feeding the waterfall, and then they came to a fork in the road. One fork led around the lake and the other inland.

Able Seamen Mike and Ren scouted the road around the lake. They came back and told the captain, "It's unmaintained down there."

The captain said, "No cut branches like the way we came?"

"No, captain."

They traveled inland. As they neared the mountain's highest ridge, the abundant fruit became sparse, and they became very hungry. They crested the mountain. On the second day of descent onto the continent, they took heart at the growing buzz of life in the jungle around them. Insects began to pester the party. On the third day, a bird call came to them through the dense leaves and branches.

Sounding more than just a little porcine, the bird's call was very strange. *Can-can! Oink-squeee!*

When the food ran out and they could find no more, they ventured off the true trail to forage in the jungle. The road was wide enough that light beams regularly illuminated the cobblestones, but the jungle floor itself was very dark beneath the canopy and intermediate biome.

They all heard Bruce's yell and rushed to him. He yelled, "It's got me!" A plant like a Venus fly trap bit Bruce on the leg. The mouth was at the end of a long vine lined with grotesque black thorns. Bruce was glad it had a mouthful of his

boot leather. (He was glad to have serviceable boots even when most others' boots had fallen apart years ago.) Boot or no, Bruce felt the planty teeth push straight through. Each time he touched the vine's mouth, its bite clenched harder, so he only yelled.

Trang was the first one to him. She said, "Hey, Brusters. Let me help you with that."

She touched the mouth parts, and Bruce screamed, he didn't yell, when it began to crush his shin bone. "It's going to break my leg!" he told her.

The captain had not gone to forage and bellowed from the road, "Come back to the road!"

Maria and Trang yelled that they were with Bruce and would stay with him. Jarrow and Ensign First Class Fernando arrived on Bruce to assess the situation.

"Look up there," Fernando said.

At first, they didn't notice, but then they all did. A plant like a bromeliad was hanging in the tree above them. That plant bore them malice.

Maria said, "Oh my God, do you feel that?"

Trang said, "That's so weird. I can, like, feel that plant's gaze on me like it hates me."

Bruce was incredulous. He said, "Weird?!?! Get that fucking thing off me!"

Fernando unsheathed the knife at his belt. Before he took hold of the vine (the vine wrapped around the tree, and it was hard to see that it was hanging from the evil bromeliad), Bruce said, "Don't touch it, just slash it." The ensign slashed it. It did bite Bruce harder for a moment but soon relented. The mouth loosened.

On the road, they gathered around to examine Bruce and the problem. Bicklesworth said, "Never saw nothin' like it. Narr, we din't never."

Bruce could not get his boot off because it was pinned to him with the teeth. The captain told Fernando to cut the teeth off, and Bruce said, "What if that makes it harder to get the



teeth out? Like a tick, you know? You don't want to tear the body off and leave the head in there."

Fernando said, "Like a what?"

Bruce said, "A tick."

The captain had never heard of it, and neither Fernando. None of the Ascendant said anything, and Fernando cut the biting pad away from the six stuck teeth. They removed Bruce's boot and saw the teeth wiggling themselves deeper into his leg.

"Ahhh!" Bruce yelled. He tried to grab one, but his blood was too slick, and the little tooth stub was too short to grab. Fernando worked quickly and pulled out four teeth with his knife, but the last two went inside.

"Cut it out," Bruce said. The captain nodded, and Fernando made a small slice. The toothy root wriggled deeper inside. "Get it out of me!" Bruce ordered. Fernando made the slice deeper and did get it out. He made another slice for the last toothy root, but he could not see it. Bruce said, "You can't leave it in there! Get it out!"

Fernando felt Bruce's leg. He tried to find the root under Bruce's skin, but he could not. In his haste, Bruce's leg was severely sliced. Fernando said, "I can't cut you again."

The captain looked closely and agreed, "There's an artery in there. We don't wanna kill ya."

Bruce protested. "I can feel it! It's on my bone." He guided Fernando's thumb along his calf and said, "There. Do you feel it?"

Fernando said, "I don't."

Bruce said, "Give me the knife." Fernando looked to the captain for instruction, but Bruce grabbed the knife out of his hand. "Give me some fucking space." He cut his leg severely looking for the missing root but could not find it.

The bosun said, "Yer still gonna have to walk on that stump, young master Brucey. Yarr, ya are. Aye."

Bruce thought about not having sutures and stopped cutting himself. He went to sleep as Maria wrapped a poultice

around his ankle. In the morning, he laced his boot over the poultice, and they walked inland. That afternoon, they came to a clearing in the jungle where they scared some birds that oinked and cawed as they flew away.

The bosun said to the captain, "Yonder grass looks mighty soft, Captain. Aye, she do. Aye, yarr."

As they walked off the stones and into the meadow, King Sfethen stopped. "Halt!" he commanded. "There's a fell air on this place."

They asked what he meant, but he could only tell them it was a feeling. Norbert said, "Shit man, I'm gonna sleep good as a motherfucker. Those road rocks are killing me." The others were of Norbert's mind, and the group left the road.

They stopped early and laid in the grass and rested. The insects buzzing about did not bite them. Some of them went straight to slumber, and the others listened to Jarrow and Thirtyseven Double D as they rambled about the quantum compass and other things. The captain uncinched the big ironwood wheel from his back and set it against a tree where he reclined with his head between two spokes.

Regarding the escape from The Sea Star, Thirtyseven Double D said, "I'm actually not certified in diffraculation, but if they were still discharging when the diffraculators uncoupled then who knows?"

After the sun set, the stars came out. Jarrow pointed to a constellation in the sky and said, "That could be the Hobgoblin."

That got the captain's attention. His mind snapped away from his dreaminess like the quantum donator in his old Leopold diffraculator. He took the big blue and yellow-tasseled bicorne cover off of his face and set it on his head. The captain said, "Where?"

Jarrow pointed to the constellation.

The captain couldn't tell. He said, "We needa finda shipwright is what we need." Then he put the cover on his face and dozed again.

Thirtyseven Double D said to Jarrow, "Very difficult to say for sure."

Jarrow conceded he couldn't be sure. "Aye."

Thirtyseven Double D said, "Jim Bobson could tell us in a heartbeat. He's a stellar stellar cartographer." He laughed at his own joke. "Myself, most of the night skies I've seen on the corporeal plane were polluted with light."

Bicklesworth said, "Yer a real city slicker! Yarr, ya are."

King Sfethen asked, "Are we on the corporeal plane here, oh black one?" and he got three responses at once.

Jarrow said, "Indeed."

Thirtyseven Double D said, "Indeed."

Bosun Bicklesworth said, "Yarr, ya are at that, young master King Sfethen."

*The corporeal plane.* King Sfethen pondered it. *The realm of flesh and blood.* He knew it well. He'd made dominion over it all his life, and yet still he knew: *There's a fell air on this place.*

Richard said, "How did we leave that realm and then come back to it?"

Late into the starry night, Jarrow told them about the Fractal Field over the captain's barging snores. The Sea Star was, or had been, in the Guild Navy's Negative Fractal Fleet. None of them had any experience with the Positive Fractal and couldn't answer any many questions about it.

Bicklesworth said, "Bo! Hurr! The sea we sailed were yon Negative Fractal." The prisoner wasn't with them, and none of them had gone over the side, but the bosun went on. "Yon rip 'tween 'er two 'ulls were it too, yarr it were. Aye. Ripped right wrong, 'twere. Narr."

Jarrow went on. "The Negative Fractal Field, Negative mind you, is something of a borderland between who knows what and who knows where."

Yessica and Naomi whispered to Rosalie, and she kept shaking her head in disagreement, but then she said loudly, "Fine!" She asked the bosun, "We noticed most of the pirate lingo tapered off once we hit the beach, but not you. What's

that about?”

The bosun said, “Narr, narr m’sweet sea fire, not I. Bo! Such are my ways. Aye, they are.”

“And the others?” She looked at the ensigns.

The bosun said, “Aye, yer some sharp ladies. Yarr, ya are.”

Naomi smiled and Yessica thanked him for the compliment.

Rosalie said, “But Mr. Bicklesworth, what about the others?”

Bosun Bicklesworth said, “We like to keep cheerful while we’re underway. Aye we do, yarr. What with the viewing and all. We likes to keep it pos’tive cheery for ye young masters. Bo!” He made a sympathetic face. “Plenty o’ time fer serious talk in Exland. Yarr, tharr be. Aye, thurr do.”

Rosalie, Naomi, and Yessica agreed that it was a good reason. Rosalie said, “So you just like to speak in that way? It seems... I don’t know, kind of funny.”

Bosun Bicklesworth said, “What do you mean? I’m funny?”

Rosalie said, “You know, love. It’s just a funny way of speaking.”

The bosun said, “What do you mean? The way I talk? What?”

Rosalie said, “It’s just funny. The way you always say, ‘Yarr!’ and everything.”

The bosun said, “I mean... what’s funny about it?”

The captain said, “Stop it,” and succeeded in not smiling.

“Captain, excuse me, but she’s a big girl, she knows what she said.” He stood up, while Rosalie remained seated. “What’d ya say? Funny how?”

Rosalie stuttered under the bosun’s suddenly looming presence.

The bosun said, “What?!” and glowered at her.

Rosalie became very uncomfortable and said, “I, uh...”

The bosun said, “You mean— wait. Lemme just understand this. Cuz I don’t know, maybe it’s me. Maybe I’m a little fucked up, maybe, but I’m ‘funny’ how? I’m funny like a

clown? I amuse you? I make you laugh? I'm here to fuckin' amuse you?! What do you mean? Funny how? How am I funny?"

Rosalie said very meekly, "Mr. Bicklesworth, please. I didn't mean to offend you. I—"

The smile ripped across the captain's face and he threw his big blue hat at the bosun when he finally yelled, "Staaahhp!" Rosalie was afraid and confused by the captain's laughter. She had seen the movie but didn't remember it.

Bosun Bicklesworth said, "We's just joshin' ya, Rosalie. Yarr, we are. Aye! Hurr, durr," and he sat back down.

The captain said, "It's a joke, ladies." Then he said, "Return my cover, Bosun," and the bosun tossed it back to him.

After that, Rosalie went to sleep. She dreamt widely, but memories of The Sea Star were not far from her.

In time, Jarrow finished talking about the Negative Fractal. He said, "Rest is for the weary, friends. There's no disappearing here." He yawned, and it spread among those who were still awake. They all soon slept. King Sfethen thought about suggesting that they post a watch, but the thought turned into a dream as the night overtook him. Memories of The Sea Star's mizzen mast were not far from any of them.

# 11

THE squealing of the animals by the clearing's small pond woke the Ascendant at dawn. The brown and green hues around the open space were disrupted by white flowers on a willowy jungle tree, and there was another bearing red fruits like a fig, and tasting like banana. The Ascendant stayed in the clearing that day. They ate and drank and rested. Lost in a thousand dreams, the animals woke them with their shrill porcine shrieking again on the second morning.

*Cock-a-doodle-oink!*

King Sfethen said, "We could set a snare tonight," and suggested eating one of the pond's visitors.

Jarrow said, "You hear that sound they make? That's the sound of brain worms, same as on the beach."

The captain said, "We'll head down the road today. If we were going to stay still, we could have stayed under those big wings with food in greater supply."

Maria rolled into some mud as she slept the night before. She said, "Look at us and look at them," as she gestured toward Jarrow and Thirtyseven Double D. "We're all a mess and they're clean as a whistle."

Indeed, where the humbly thatched garb of the Ascendant was mud-caked and grime-encrusted, Jarrow and Thirtyseven Double D were spotless and shiny. Their black suits showed

no wear despite very many years of wear and tear on the beach.

Rosalie said, "That's some suit, love."

Jarrow agreed and thanked her for noticing. "Made it myself," he said.

Rosalie said, "Why are your hands and face so clean?"

Jarrow smiled and said, "Oh yes, of course! I have a special coating, you see. It prevents the skin cells from going into the electronics."

Rosalie said, "Damn."

Trang said, "That must be nice," and contemplated her dirty fingernails.

Maria said, "That must be nice," too.

The Ascendant and the navy men bathed after sunrise. While they were in the water, a creature like a pig-buffalo arrived at the far side of the pond, eight feet tall at the shoulder. It eyed them and made a sound: *rrroink!* It waded into the pond where a small stream drained into the jungle. It drank paying them no mind, and then, still paying them no mind, it pinched a loaf into the water. Then the party left the clearing, and the fruit-bearing trees became very sparse. Bruce limped badly. A day beyond the clearing, he could not stand in the morning.

Jarrow said, "Let me have a look, please."

Bruce said, "No, I'm alright. Just help me up."

Jarrow said, "Please. If its infected, then we should clean it."

Bruce knew it was more than infected, and he argued that he was fine. In the end, he relented and allowed them to take his boot off. The wounds were already blackened, and the red streaks of blood poisoning ran as far as his knee. The newly necrotic flesh sprouted a fine green moss.

"Oh!" Trang said. "Urania, come look at this."

Urania had been a healer in a life that seemed short and distant compared to the time they'd spent on The Sea Star and on the beach. She said, "The leg has to come off."

Bruce said, "No way!"

Urania said, "I don't think another poultice is going to help,

Bruce.”

Norbert said, “That leg is well gone, matey. Sorry.”

The captain told the others to stand back, and he squatted in front of Bruce with the bosun. They agreed that the leg would have to go.

Bruce said, “Just leave me here, you go on.”

Bicklesworth said, “Narr, young master. We can’t ‘bandon our charges ‘fore we get to Exland. Narr, narr, narr.”

They restrained Bruce as well as they could. Captain Atlas asked for Fernando’s knife. The captain asked Urania, “Have you done it before?” She had, and since the captain had never done it, nor any of his crew, he asked her to do it.

Urania tied a tourniquet above Bruce’s knee, higher up on his thigh. She began the operation, and the knife was very sharp. She cut deeply into Bruce’s calf and tried to cut a straight line. Bruce thrashed, but they restrained him well, and she continued. She changed her grip on the knife to finish the cut when a small fly trap mouth on a vine came out of the wound and bit her on the thumb. She screamed and dropped the knife.

Urania tried to pry it off her finger but could not. The mouth gripped like a vice and tried to crush the thin bone in her dainty hand. She screamed again but told the others to stay back. She used the knife to cut the mouth’s vine. Bruce flailed with his half-severed leg, and the distracted team did not restrain him well. The tourniquet loosened, and there was a spray of arterial blood before the bosun tightened the tourniquet again.

The captain and the two IT guys attended Urania. The ensigns and two Ascendant men held Bruce fast as the bosun tried to finish the cut. He said, “Hold fast now. And you too, young master Brucey.” The others stayed back.

The bosun began the cut, but another small mouth, larger than the one that bit Urania but still much smaller than the one that bit Bruce, ripped out of the thigh, above the tourniquet even. It attacked the bosun. Bicklesworth slapped the mouth



away from his hand. Then he severed the vine and stabbed the head with the knife.

Richard, who was holding the foot of the nearly severed leg, said, "Look." More mouths undulated under Bruce's skin.

They decided that it would be impossible to amputate at the hip without killing him so the party went down the road without him. Thirtyseven Double D and Jarrow removed the mouth from Urania's thumb without losing any of the teeth, but she was worried as they walked. The party came to a fruit-bearing tree near a stream that ran under the road, so they ate and rested. Then they didn't find food for four days. Nearly starving, they came to Braido Goran's farm.

*Squaw-can. Oink-squeeee!*

# 12

DESCRIPTIO LeFranco was undercover in Emerald Station where they called him Durr Badminton. He was a sergeant in the City Guards, and on a certain day he was on market patrol with Shmalph Grouchevil and Shmalfo Hurtpain. He was detailed with them as on most days. The two were particularly stupid, even for pigs, and that made Des' real job as an infiltrating Guild Knight easier. In truth, Descriptio LeFranco was a high-ranking paladin from Gaia in the far west, even beyond the Orient and the Eternion Sea.

The High Council of the Paladins of Gaia was under the impression that the Guild had been corrupted. In fact, the Guild was as pure and good as ever, but Guild defeat after Guild defeat at the hands of the Eternal Enemy was mistaken for collusion, cooperation, and acquiescence. Called the Eternal Enemy by the Guild of the Greater Good, and called the Dark Lord in Emerald Station, the surrounding territories, and elsewhere, the Dark Mage was destroying the Guild. Emerald Station had been a Guild waypoint since times immemorial but was conquered and overrun with pigs nigh five thousand years ago. Home to almost a million humans at its peak, Emerald Station held about four million pigs while the paladin was there.

Far across a wide basin to the east, Ruby Town still stood

as a bastion of hope. It was populated with healthy and good men, but Des was never able to enter or even approach its gates. It was protected by a powerful wizard whose magic was unknown to the Paladins of Gaia. From certain vantage points in Emerald Station, Ruby Town could be seen as a bright pinkish spot set against the gray mountains that barbed the center of the Great Basin between the much taller coastal mountains and the still taller high plains plateau to the east of Ruby Town.

Before infiltrating the City Guards, Descriptio LeFranco infiltrated the Guild. Infiltrator or not, the paladin was a Guild Knight. The Pendragon Knights had poured space water on his head, and he meant the words when he said the oath. He was a Guild Knight of the Fifth Degree on the day he agreed to go into Emerald Station. He never learned if the magic of the Ruby Town wizard was known to the Guild of the Greater Good.

On the day he entered Emerald Station, Descriptio LeFranco and a band of Guild Knights ambushed a patrolling squad of Emerald Station pig-men. They killed all but one. Infiltrating Emerald Station was a suicide mission, allegedly, because the mission required a brave knight to let himself be consumed by brain worms. Des volunteered. He knew his secret paladin powers would prevent his succumbing to complete consumption. He could skirt the line between good and evil well enough to convince the Emerald Station pigs even if the Dark Mage's dark mages might be able to tell him apart. He took the risk because he thought it would hasten the completion of his real mission, which was not to infiltrate the Guild's command ranks. The real mission was to harass the armies of the Dark Mage and sow as much destruction among them as possible. It was only incidental that the High Council had come to believe that the Guild was under the influence of the Dark Mage. For Descriptio LeFranco, the Guild mission was the side mission.

Des took his foot off the pig-man's throat. He said, "What's your name?"

The pig vocalized, “*Rrrroink! Squeee! Squeee-schnaub! Rr—*”

Des stepped on the pig’s throat again. He said, “Speak properly.” He stepped on the pig’s throat harder and asked again. “What’s your name?” He did not remove his boot.

The pig sputtered and squealed. When the fear of suffocation filled the pig’s tiny black and bloodshot eyes, Des’ commander on that patrol, the fourth after three unsuccessful attempts to locate a roaming pig patrol, Guild Knight of the Eleventh Degree Torrin Rotino, said “Tell us your name, pig.”

Des removed his boot. The pig gasped and oinked. Then he said, “Gunky Dirtybandage.”

The Guild Knights interrogated Gunky Dirtybandage under torture—Guild torture, not dark torture—and then they killed him. Torrin Routino said to Des, “Good luck, Des,” and the other Guild Knights wished him luck as well.

Des sliced open Gunky’s fat belly and ripped out his guts. He cut the intestines away from the rest of it. With only a grimace, he squeezed the worm ridden bile and muck into his mouth. He swallowed several mouthfuls. He bashed Gunky’s head with a rock and picked out some brain worms which he snorted. During every moment of it, he felt the white light of his purpose and the High Council of the Paladins of Gaia all around him. Then he went into the hyperbolic time chamber that the Guild patrol had on their cart. He stayed in for three hours and came out completely deformed. His new porcine body only vaguely resembled the man he’d been (which no one would have recognized in Gaia.) Descriptio LeFranco looked like a real pig-man, through and through. After three years in Emerald Station, word on the street was that the Dark Lord would soon visit.

Shmalfo banged his poleaxe against the pots and pans hanging on a seller’s small stand. He said, “*Rrrroink!* Wot you lot doin’?” The mischievous piglets ran into the alley.

Des said, “Don’t worry about it, oink.” He wanted to stay in the market. As a Gaian paladin, Des’ psychic powers were great but also greatly diminished while he fostered the worm

colony in his body. Des wanted to stay in the market where he could scan pigs' minds in the crowd. Everyone was thinking about the Dark Lord's visit, but no one knew when. Soon was the word. *Soon.*

The three pigs walked up and down Market Street until mid-day when the officer of the day relieved them and gave familiar orders to another trio of City Guards. Des, Shmalph, and Shmalfo returned to the armory and went their separate ways. Des went to the barracks room he shared with Murdo Porkswine. Not only was Murdo not evil through and through like most of the other pigs, he could be a decent fellow if he wasn't too hungry.

Des influenced the room assignments with his psychic powers. To avoid detection by the dark mages that lived in Emerald Station, Des mostly stuck to passive psychic powers, and he never used magic. After his last roommate mysteriously fell from the city wall while on patrol with Des, Des subtly insisted on his choice of roommate, and his intention did manifest. The pigs were feeble-minded. The Dark Mage liked it that way, and it made Des' job easier.

Durr Badminton said, "Oink. Hey, Murdo."

Murdo said, "*Schnaub-squee!* Roomie!"

Des defecated in the corner of the room as per barracks regulation. He said, "Hear anything, squee squee, about the Dark Lord today?" Then he added, "I'm so excited."

"*Nnnoink,*" Murdo replied.

"Alright, I'm going to the park," Des said. "Oink."

Murdo said, "Dark Lord probly ain't been here since the days o' Abrahincoln Georgington."

Des acted shocked like he always did, but it was one of Murdo's finest qualities. Murdo Porkswine wasn't afraid to say the forbidden name. "Quiet, you," Des said.

Des patrolled the park kicking around in the dirt with his nasty pig foot as if scrounging for grubs. Truly, the paladin scanned for dark mages. They were known to come to the park to rape piglets from time to time, and while he never

scanned their minds directly, he could pick up images, and sometimes he'd overhear a loud thought. There were no mages, so he sat and watched the piglets play. Even in their misshapen bodies, the children retained the childlike joys of human children. The porcine mothers were not unlike human mothers with regard to their own children, but they would kill another's unattended piglet without remorse. Des saw one fresh piglet body and two rotten ones in the park's body dump. *They should have cleared those out by now.*

Des thought about Abraham Lincoln Georgington. Even when the mere mention of the name had carried a death sentence for many millennia, somehow the name still floated to Durr Badminton's ears. His best guess was that the name's verboten status made it somehow attractive. He once asked Murdo why he said it, but when he didn't get a straight answer, he didn't pursue it. He didn't want to blow his cover. Unselfish curiosity wasn't too natural among the Dark Mage's porcine minions, and certainly not in Emerald Station.

In the morning, Des, Shmalph, and Shmalfo were assigned to gate duty at the Market Gate in the fourth of Emerald Station's nested defensive walls. Outer Wall was dotted with crenelated turrets and Split Wall, the wall hanging the Market Gate and many other major and minor gates, was the only interior wall also sporting turrets.

Shmalph said, "*Oink!* Ey, Durr, why don't they, *oink-squeee*, send us the same erryday?" Random duty made it harder to slack off.

Shmalfo said, "Yeah."

Des said, "Oink, they probably don't want us cooking up our own machinations."

Shmalph said, "*Schnaub schnaub!* What's a makeration?"

Des kicked him in his back-bending knee and said, "Shut up! And it's Sergeant Badminton to you. How many, oink oink, times do I have to tell you?"

Des didn't gather any useful information during the day. The officer of the day relieved them. They went to the armory

together and then parted ways. Des went to the flaying post, something he did to keep character. The dead bastard hung there limp, and Des shouted some insults at the corpse. What the other gathered pigs mostly didn't know was that the pig tied to that particular pole was selected by lottery. It was the City Guards' commander's idea of maintaining order: the charges were always made up. Anyone with real charges, felonies, was sent up the hill to the Dark Vassals.

Des glanced into the distance where a massive emerald spire, the Emerald Spire, stood in the middle of Emerald Station. Half a mile above the city, the fortress atop the spire was said to be built by Abraham Lincoln Georgington himself, but Des doubted the man had ever been to Emerald Station. The sun dipped behind the monolith, and its light splashed the city with brilliant green hues refracted in the giant jewel.

Des went into a restaurant boasting, "City Guards! Make way!" He pushed his way into the kitchen. The chef and staff were about to protest, but Des, out of uniform, yelled, "City Guards, oink! What the fuck is going on here?" He knocked over a prep table. The clang of metalware and shattered clay was very loud and scary to the workers.

Des barged around inspecting. He yelled, "Oink, shut the fuck up! Oink, shut the fuck up!" as he did. He found a bowl of kibble that they hadn't dusted with desiccated feces yet and said, "What the fuck is this?"

The chef told him they would never serve it like that and that they were, "bout to make it shitty."

Des confiscated the kibble and left them with a warning as he kicked down the back door and exited. "Squeee! I oughtta bring you to the flaying pole!" Once he was far enough away from the restaurant, he ate the clean food. It was a rare treat, one he didn't allow himself often.

Far above the city, the Dark Lord raised his finger, and Colonel Oozeopus paused his briefing. Unbeknownst to Descriptio LeFranco, the Dark Lord had entered Emerald Station five hours earlier. The Dark Lord's heavy black cloak swept

the floor as he walked to a window overlooking the neighborhood where Des ate clean kibble. He stared out at the microscopic cityscape below. The Dark Lord closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He sent out his attention. Des shivered and knew the Dark Lord was near. He dumped the kibble into a drain and started a fist fight with the first pig he could find.

In the Emerald Fortress, which was gray and mostly made of granite, the Dark Lord said, "Colonel Oozepus, I want a citywide food inspection. Immediately."

Colonel Oozepus said, "Of course, m'lord. *Schnaub-squeee!* Right away." Colonel Oozepus did an about face, but the Dark Lord stopped him.

The Dark Lord said, "Not right now, Colonel. Tomorrow. Finish your briefing."

Des beat that poor schlub half to death and walked back to the barracks. The sounds of men beating their wives and fathers beating their children filled the stinking night air. Every sound was a shade of hate. There was no laughter, not one laugh or chuckle.



# 13

BACK on the cobbled road, they were very hungry. The portion of The Sea Star's remnant came to a fork in the road and took the turn more traveled. Later, those who could still look back would wonder if the choice was what it seemed: an epic blunder. Two days down the more trodden trail, they smelled the smoke from the fire in Braido Goran's hearth. Soon after, sunbeams from the deforested farmland cut across the general dimness cast on the road by the overgrowth.

The captain called for Ensign Thierry.

"Sir!" Thierry said.

"Take Able Seamen Umit and Glorvit. Find out where that smoke is coming from and judge if there's kind folk there. Judge their disposition, but don't let them see you."

"Aye, Captain." The three of them went into the jungle on the same side of the road as the farm. The captain ordered everyone else into the jungle on the other side.

Eduardo said, "I don't want to wait here, let me go with them."

The captain said, "Very well then."

Eduardo joined the three Guildsmen.

King Sfethen said to no one in particular, "There's a fell air on this place."

Richard said, "I agree."

As the sun transited the sky, sunbeams cutting through the canopy moved across the places where the weary sojourners lay. The jungle buzzed with insects, but mostly they did not approach the party of tired and time-tested travelers. Other than the buzzing and soft sounds of the trees and plants, the jungle seemed desolate. The jungle was alive with pig-birds, *caw-caw oink-oink*, but they didn't see any.

About an hour after Thierry's party left, Jarrow hushed the group talking amongst themselves. They were mostly grumbling about their rumbling stomachs which were unsettled by Jarrow's harsh hush: "Shhhh!!!"

In sight of those who were facing the right direction, and whose view wasn't blocked by a tree, a little porcine boy dashed from the downroad clearing onto the cobbled road itself. He chased a red bouncy ball. He wore blue suspenders and a straw hat. A little porcine girl followed him laughing loudly with yellow ribbons tied around her long pink pig ears. The children fetched their ball and disappeared from the road. Then their sounds were occulted by the sounds of the jungle.

*Oink-caw! Oink-caw! Squeee!*

Near sunset, the scouting party returned. Ensign Thierry said, "It's one family. All pigs, but they seem civilized. Two adults and I counted four young, but they have a big barn and a fancy farmhouse. There could be more I didn't see to count."

The captain said, "They seemed civilized?"

Thierry said, "Aye, Captain. The grounds are well maintained. The stable is in good order. The horses look healthy enough for pig-horses. The barn is well built, and the house is just fine though I couldn't see the door." The door was painted with a peculiar black and white tessellation crossed by several yellowish green stripes. A small skull was nailed to the door frame: the sigil of the Eternal Enemy. "The door faces the road and we couldn't get around to it without riskin' 'xposin' ourselves." If they had gotten a view from the front, they would have seen the unpainted wooden door that opened into the vestibule where the painted door then opened into the

home proper. “They’ve got a fine rock garden too. I never saw such a thing, a pig keeping a beautiful garden. It’s very nice.”

Eduardo added, “Gorgeous garden.”

The captain said, “What do you think, Mr. Bicklesworth?”

Bicklesworth said, “Garr! ‘Tis yer call, Captain. Yarr, ‘tis, aye.”

The captain said, “Yes, but what’s your sense?”

“A pig’s a pig, garr. Big pig, little pig, aye.” The bosun choked and chortled for effect.

It wasn’t exactly true that all pigs were the same. There were Guild ships that traded with pig towns on the coast of the Negative Fractal. Sometimes living creatures simply contracted brain worms without falling under the Eternal Enemy’s spiteful spell. The disease was an altogether sad situation for all involved.

“I agree.” The captain dictated that he would lead a party late in the night to kill the family and plunder the farm.

*Kill my family, will ya?* Braido Goran listened from behind a nearby tree.

Alexandra was the first of the Ascendant to protest. “You want to kill those adorable children?”

The bosun said, “Narr, lass. They’s piglets not children. Narr, narr, narr.”

The captain said, “And, Alexandra, please don’t call them adorable.” However, most of the other Ascendant voiced their solidarity with Alexandra’s ideological opposition.

“Very well,” the captain said. He considered the garden as something eccentric and so thought to investigate. He said, “Maybe we can get some information from them.” It was another blunder. More of them would have lived to tell the tale of the first blunder if they hadn’t blundered again.

They were very hungry. Perhaps the captain was the hungriest among them. Carrying the big ironwood wheel everyday was taxing. It was very heavy, but the captain didn’t feel the weight as he reclined on the wheel where it stood against a tall

tree's twisted trunk.

The bosun said, "Burr, and if they start actin' evil, then we kill 'em. Yarr, yarr, yarr. Kill 'em dead as dirt, aye."

Several of the Guild sailors agreed.

"Aye."

"Kill 'em."

"Yarr, kill 'em."

The captain explained to the Ascendant what the painted door meant. They all agreed that if the door bore the sigil, they should not approach during the day. If the door bore the sigil, they would kill the family in the following night's moonlight. When the captain was confident there were no objections, he tried to sleep, but his hunger hounded him.

Once the last conversation died down, Braido went home. *Stupid outlanders*. He cooked up a plan of his own. Unlike the pigs in Emerald Station, Braido Goran's wits were sharp.

# 14

DESCRIPTIO LeFranco, a.k.a. City Guard Sergeant Durr Badminton, stood at parade rest guarding Emerald Station's Grand Gate which was open behind him. The doors were painted with the terrible tessellation and stripes. Ahead of him, Shmalph and Shmalfo stood at attention. A single file of pigs entered through Emerald Station's Outer Wall beneath their crossed polearms. A triceratops skull was jammed into the extensive woodwork that supported the gate's hinges under Outer Wall's stone arch. Unable to mount the big skull long ago, a crew of Emerald Station pigs mounted it on a battering ram and charged the gate's frame. All three horns were planted deeply in the wood, and they simply detached the battering ram behind it. The skull sat there ever since, facing what Des thought was the wrong direction.

Another eight pigs stood in formation behind Sergeant Badminton, ready to kill on his command. In front of Shmalph and Shmalfo, the sergeant of the watch and the duty officer asked each pig about their business before sending them first between Shmalph and Shmalfo who gave them menacing looks despite their positions of attention, and then through the open gate. Shmalph and Shmalfo were large, haggard, and menacing even for pigs. Pigs walked between them and then past Sergeant Badminton and his killing squad before disappearing into

the clutches of Emerald Station. Des scanned their minds as they entered.

Braido Jr. and Brian stepped forward, and the duty officer asked them the standard questions. “*Schnaub!* What’s your, *oink*, business in Emerald, *squeee*, Station?”

*Rapers.* Plain as day, Des could see that the boys had raped a sow and left her for dead on the road. Though his features had changed three years ago, and he played the part well, *Descriptio* was no pig. The rape in his mind set sore with him. Any Guild Knight worth his salt could have seen that the two pig-boys had raped a pig-woman and her female piglet on the road, but the paladin thought there was something more.

The bacteriodes in Des’ gut and the worms in his brain had weakened his paladin abilities terribly. He looked around and saw a dark mage disguised as a pauper supervising the City Guards’ gate operation. He couldn’t be sure if there were other mages in the milieu of merchants and migrants that paced and meandered without entering or exiting. Des was certain, however, that if the boys got into the city, he would never find them. He shouted, “You, stop!”

The crouching mage was surprised where he had been completely still leaning against the stonework all morning. In full view of the entire contingent of City Guards, Des charged the man and speared his belly. He used his great strength to lift the mage clean off his feet, and Des threw him with a motion like a pole vaulter in flight. The mage’s head hit the stones first. He was knocked unconscious and never woke. Des approached him and shook the limp body by the folds of its cloak. “Oink-squeee!!! Wot you doin’ ‘ere, pig shit?” He shook the cloak so it obscured his hand when he palmed the pendant that identified the mage as a Dark Vassal of official capacity.

The guards, who had seen the whole thing, remained in formation. The duty officer initially faced the other direction, and he only laughed at what he thought was cold-blooded murder. He said, “Good job, Sergeant Badminton.”

Braido Jr. and Brian stopped in their tracks to watch the commotion. Des made eye contact with the elder pig-boy, Braido Jr. Reaching deep into the white light that remained hidden deep within, Descriptio LeFranco, Guild Knight and Seventh Paladin of Gaia, cast a spell of knowing.

*Outlanders.* There were outlanders at the boys' farmhold. During three years in Emerald Station, it was the first instance of outlanders he'd uncovered. Emerald Station was too far from the front for any trustworthy news of the war to pass through the gate on the mind of a feeble-minded and gossip-minded pig.

The paladin glanced around hoping no one had noticed his magic. Sometimes there were several mages supervising the gate, themselves scanning minds for useful information. High above Emerald Station in the Emerald Fortress, the resting Dark Lord didn't notice the weakly cast spell. Magic was a gamble that Des' intuition told him to take when he sensed that his fate and the pig-boys' were intertwined. When he felt the Dark Lord's presence the night before, and then encountered these curious pig-boys straightaway, he was too wise to ignore the signs. His time in Emerald Station was drawing to a close.

The remnant of the spell ruminated deep in the paladin's psyche. Outlanders, but there was something more. The outlanders knew something. Descriptio LeFranco was aware that the Guild had a Navy, but he'd never met a Guild Sailor and didn't know what the Guild Navy did. What he did know was that the Dark Mage was in Emerald Station, and the paladin would attempt an assassination. If he found success, he would return to Gaia. If he failed (and lived), he would notify the Guild of wrecked sailors in the Great Basin and report on the whereabouts of the Eternal Enemy.

Braido Goran Jr. and his brother Brian entered Emerald station. They walked under the first portcullis and wondered at the murder holes lining the entrance to the city. They crossed under the second portcullis and disappeared into the bazaar. While Des still crouched over the mage's dying body,

the sergeant of the watch, First Sergeant Kinkypork Porkypork, approached and ripped an ululating fart. He waved it in Des' face and ordered him to get back in formation.

The duty officer, Captain Hater, said, "*Schnaub!* Mind that bearing, *oink*, ya fat bastard."

Des resumed his position in front of the kill squad who cared not one bit about the murder and had no curiosity about it.

Murdo Porkswine had first fallen into Des' good graces when he witnessed a murder and asked the killer, "*Oink!* Why'd ya do that?" Murdo was Des' constant reminder that the pigs weren't his enemy. The Dark Mage was the enemy, and the worms were his poison. The pigs were only pigs because the forces of light had faltered. Descriptio still didn't know when that had happened or why, and neither did the High Council of the Paladins of Gaia. His Gaian mission to infiltrate the Guild was in no small part motivated by their search for that very answer. When he found it—if he found it—then he would return to Gaia... or he would resolve the situation personally, paladin style. Descriptio LeFranco was a very high-ranking paladin.

Des thought he would have a day or two before someone from the Emerald Fortress came around asking questions about the dead mage. With his spell of knowing in effect, the magic cast and already beyond the detection of the forces of evil, later Des would have no problem finding the Goran boys in Emerald Station. Even as they disappeared into the crowd, Des could see their sight in his mind's eye.

The watch ended, and Des was relieved. He returned to the armory and then to his room where he changed his baroque black riot gear for civilian attire.

Murdo Porkswine said, "Ay, roomie, *oink*, you wanna go down to the stables?"

"Oink, I can't today, my friend. I've got, oink, some matters to tend."

Murdo said, "Oh. Matters, huh?"



“Oink yeah, roomie. I got matters.” Durr clapped Murdo on the back. “Important matters, oink. The fate of the realm is at stake.”

Murdo said, “Oh. Well, then... *oink oink!*” Des seemed distant lately. Murdo didn’t know Des had the Dark Mage’s arrival on his mind. He wondered if Des was mad at him. Murdo thought, *Is a work friend, oink, really a friend?* It was something Murdo often wondered in those days. He thought of Durr Badminton as a gentle soul like himself. Murdo was both right and wrong about that. They used to go to the stables to play farfelhoedadder with the horseshoes fairly often, but then Des had turned him down six or eight times in a row. Murdo left and sat on Outer Wall. He liked to stare across the valley and dream about life in Ruby Town where the protective force field shrouding the vast metropolis was a single reddish speck glowing far in the distance.

The Goran pigs were in the jewel souk in the market district, so Des went there. A vendor asked him, “You wanna, *schnaub schnaub*, buy some, *oink*, merchandise? *Schnaub-squee! Oink-oink-squee!!!*”

Des said, “No.”

“Come on! You buy. *Oink!* You buy! *Squeeeee!!!*”

Des closed on the boys. Behind him, the pig squealed, “*Squuuueee! We make deal! You buy! Squeee!*”

Braido Goran’s litter recognized someone. Des felt their excitement, but he could no longer see them. A black smoke clouded his mind’s eye. He tried to retrace their steps in his memory, but the black smoke scrubbed back in time. It wiped away any traces of Des’ paladin magic. It was bad timing. All day, the young pigs wandered the city, but they finally found what they were looking for just as he was nearly upon them.

Counter-magic or no, Des had studied the city well. He had long suspected that Diklop Strictstrop, merchant seller of jewels, precious metals, and exotic feces, was secretly a high-ranking member of the Dark Vassals of Emerald Station. Des glanced through the door as he passed Strictstrop’s shop, and

the pig-boys were there. He kept walking.

Braido Goran had other sons, but Braido Jr. and Brian were the only males born in his first litter. Brian was the runt, so Braido only taught the signs to Braido Jr. After they exited Diklop Strictstrop's shop, Braido Jr. told Brian, "Stay, *oink*, behind me. *Squeee!* Don't say anything."

Brian said, "*Oink! Squeee-schnaub!*"

The budding pig-men wandered through the market district, and Descriptio LeFranco followed them. The Goran seed looked for the sign Strictstrop's pig had described to them: a pig-wolf's head mounted on a plaque with a leather braid around its neck. Progress was slow as the boys meticulously scanned each cart, storefront, and kiosk. The hawkers saw their interested gazes and demanded they buy fruits or cloth, imported feces with foreign flavors, or even smoking beads and other things. Durr pulled his cloak low over his face so that it set on his elongated pig snout. He didn't want to be recognized. City Guards were not well liked in Market District.

As each seller approached the Goran children, Braido Jr. would subtly twist his fingers and hands making the mark. Most didn't recognize it. Those who did nodded and answered in kind with their hands, or did so with their hooves if they were hooven pigs, and let the two go peacefully without insisting on a purchase. Market Street wound around until switchbacks began at the base of the foothills on the eastern side of the Emerald Spire which rose in the center of Emerald Station. When they saw the big pig-wolf's head, Braido Jr. realized that his cloak and dagger was uncalled for. A side street flanked by two wide A-frames was crossed over by a beam set atop them. Hanging from the pole, a noose carried the taxidermied head of the biggest pig-wolf either of them had ever seen. The head alone was taller even than Brian who was born a runt but had filled out well. The head cocked skyward. The noose around the neck was held to the detached head by the shield plaque on which the head was mounted. The noose gathered tension and let it go as the thing slowly twisted from side to side in the

breeze. Alongside the noose was a thin leather braid.

A guard stood at ease under each of the flanking A-frames. One said, "No biness 'ere fer you, piglet."

Braido Jr. pointed to the end of his snout and made a cloven hoof with his other hand. Both guards saw and came to attention, suddenly surprised. Both guards interlocked their own fingers in different gestures. Braido Jr. turned away from the false sign and said, "My mother's been, *schnaub*, sick these last three nights." Then he turned to the other guard and said, "Four terrible fits just last night and the pig-bird has nothing to do."

The guard said, "Very well then, carry on." Braido Jr. felt proud. He did it just the way his father showed him. Des saw the guards and kept walking.

Braido Jr. did not carry on. He needed more information. He said to the guard, "*Squee!* Where can I find, *oink*, a long red cloak?" They went through several layers of coded exchange, exactly as Braido Sr. had taught him, and at the end of it the guard told him to see Hehog Bloody in the last stand on the right before the side street, an alley really, dead ended at the rocks. Braido Jr. and Brian waded deeper into Emerald Station.

Des knew that if the boys were walking down that street after seeing Diklop Strictstrop, then they must be going to see Hehog Bloody. The alley had no other exits. Des knew Market District well. He waited for them to come back onto Market Street. In only minutes, Hehog crossed under the big pig-wolf head holding each boy's hand in his own and moving in quite a rush. Whatever it was, it was enough that he was still wearing the ridiculous gilded robes in which he tended shop but usually never wore in the open. Flaunting wealth on the streets of Emerald Station was a decent invitation to murder. The big pig lumbered large over the Goran boys as he hustled them up Market Street. The boys were almost lost in the great and gold billowing folds of Hehog's fancy robe.

The two guards left their posts and followed behind the trio.

Des followed the five of them. Hehog Bloody's psychic defense was quite strong. It was how Des first came to identify him as a Dark Vassal of secret rank. Whatever the Goran pigs told Hehog put him off his guard, and Des sensed that they were going to see Diklop Strictstrop, who was not in his shop, further up the hill. The paladin was greatly disturbed because his senses below told him Strictstrop *was* in his shop, but now they told him that Bloody knew otherwise.

*Deception.* Des felt uneasy. He hadn't felt the presence of the Dark Mage in Emerald Station, and now he *had* felt a presence where there was none. He wondered if the brain worms were finally getting the best of him.

Hehog dragged the boys up the hill. His front-bending knees made it a lot easier for to him walk briskly uphill. They went deeper into the city through two unguarded gates, but then they came to Inner Wall which was also called Emerald Wall because it was nearest the gargantuan emerald outcrop that gave Emerald Station its name. The innermost sanctum of Emerald Station was High Town. Des hadn't anticipated that the boys were going all the way to High Town. He had no plan to get past the Inner Gate guards that were Imperial Guards proper rather than City Guards. The Emerald Station pigs, all Emerald Station City Guards were basin locals, were mostly pink and fat, but the Imperial Guards were a different breed. They were black with small pink splotches or fully black, and their big boorish bodies bristled with hair so thick it should shame quills.

Before Inner Wall's Scum Gate, Des watched Hehog and the Goran pig-boys approach the two sentries standing at attention with crossed polearms. The officer of the watch greeted them and then disappeared into High Town. Hehog told his own guards to return to the alley below. Des walked past them but did not approach Scum Gate. Hehog leaned against the wall, and Des kept his distance as he walked past while reaching out with his mind. Strictstrop was coming out to meet them.

Minutes passed, then an hour, and then finally Diklop Strictstrop appeared. Diklop and Hehog greeted in sign and spoke, but Descriptio LeFranco could not hear them, so he walked closer. As he approached, Diklop exclaimed, “Outlanders!?” but then lowered his voice. Des hastened his approach but only slightly so as to remain incognito. When he was finally able to discern what was being said, Diklop Strictstrop’s words were, “—and is Zorolo da Vinci among them?”

It was a name Des hadn’t heard in a long time, and he was surprised to hear it. In a million years, the paladin never would have thought to hear that name from the lips of Diklop Strictstrop. Between the mention of Zorolo da Vinci, his failure to detect the presence of the Dark Mage even locally in Emerald Station, and the deception of Strictstrop’s false presence below, Des decided it was time for his mission in Emerald Station to come to an end. The logic crystallized in Des’ mind, and that was the end of Diklop and Hehog.

The street was full of pigs going here and there, some doing their own business and some doing the duties the Dark Mage had set before them. When the two farm pigs came through Outer Gate, where Des first laid eyes upon their flesh, he kenned the way back to the Goran farm. It would take a miracle to get the boys somewhere he could deal with them in peace, but, at worst, the paladin thought he could beat the Emerald Station pigs to the farm. Des assumed Hehog knew where the Goran farm was too. It was a safe bet that the news had gone all the way to the gold souk by then.

Des made a veil over his intent and clenched three shuriken between the fingers of his right hand. The paladin drew and threw, and Hehog Bloody dropped dead when one cleaved the spinal cord at the nape of his neck. Diklop Strictstrop stumbled. He was blinded by the shuriken set in his eyes. Before he hit the ground, the paladin cast a spell of befuddlement. He yelled into the befuddled crowd, “There he is! There he is!” He waved his accusing finger like a madman. It worked on the

crowd, but the Imperial Guard commander looked away and then looked back. The pig-boys were befuddled, and Des said, "Don't move." He crushed the boys' volition with a burst of psychic vigor as he rushed into battle.

Des grabbed his remaining shuriken, all viciously poisoned, three in each hand, and he killed six Imperial Guards with an overhand right and backhand left. The officer, the sergeant, the two pigs with crossed polearms, the squad leader behind them, and one of the pigs in the kill squad all fell dead. All neck shots, the poison entered their blood. Their hearts stopped beating, and they died. Des took the daggers at his waist and plunged into the remaining formation whose befuddlement was trumped by their militarized response to bloodshed. Befuddled or not, Des had the attention of everyone in sight. The big Imperial pigs hardly brought their polearms to bear before Des was among them. He twirled his cloak and threw it in front of him as he charged. Hidden silk streamers tucked within exploded a blast of confusion. The two Imperial Guards in front stabbed at Des but could not see him behind the silky swirling veil. When Des appeared again, their throats were cut. Like a whirlwind, Des cut down nine more Imperial Guards with his daggers.

The pigs in the street looked at him covered in blood. Blood spurted from the necks of the bodies on the ground. Des roared, "Befuddle!!!," and it worked again. It worked on the unarmed crowd, but the alarm horn sounded on the wall. Des told the crowd, "There he is! Stop him!," and pointed to a random pig. Even as the paladin fooled the pigs in the crowd, the horns echoed across Emerald Station. Every horn on every wall soon blew its baritone bellow. As the pigs in the crowd set upon the one Des fingered, Des loaded the stunned boys onto the back of a turnip cart and unhitched the pig-donkey.

"Yah! Yah!" The paladin cracked the whip, and they were off. The horns cleared the streets, and the three rolled down Market Street in great haste. By the time they reached Market Gate, a full phalanx of City Guards was assembled, and Des

knew the Imperial Guards were close behind.

The jarring of the rickety cart wheels on the roughshod road accelerated Braido Jr.'s recovery from befuddlement. As Des stopped the cart jerking the bridle in the pig-donkey's mouth, the elder Goran boy said, "Huh?"

Des said, "Shut up," and jumped out of the cart.

Captain Hater stood at the front of the phalanx. He recognized Descriptio LeFranco in pig form and said, "*Rrroink!* Badminton!!! What the, *rrroink*, fuck're you doin'?"

Forty-eight City Guards plus their captain, Des thought he could handle it as long as the two pigs stayed in the cart. When he reached for his daggers, however, one of them had shaken from its hilt on the rough ride down the road. With only one dagger and cursed with the filth of worms, the paladin didn't like his odds. He looked up from the empty hilt and made eye contact with Captain Hater. The disappointment on Des' deformed porcine countenance both excited and enraged the City Guard captain.

Hater commanded, "*Rrroink!!!* Forward!" and then, "Attack-*schnaub!!!*" The first row of City guards leveled their spears. The second row brought theirs down to thirty degrees, and the third row sixty as the phalanx forged forward. Vile beasts that they were, the pigs had a knack for military order.

Des imagined his sword in hand, Land Waster, but it was hidden in a boulderfall, wrapped in oil cloth far away.

Captain Hater oinked, "*Rrroink*, lay, *rrroink*, on the ground, *schnaub-oink*, right now!"

Des looked at Braido Goran's seed. The phalanx would be on him in moments, and he could hear the boots of the Imperial Guards who would appear at the bend behind directly. He weighed his options. There was no choice but magic, though he couldn't be sure if his magic was still strong enough. The phalanx marched forward in lockstep, rhythmically banging their spears on their shields and then their shields on the cobblestones.

*Stomp-bash-smash! Stomp-bash-smash!*

The Goran pigs had a moment in which they could have escaped but did not take it. They cowered in the back of the turnip truck. The paladin dropped to a knee and mumbled an incantation, powerful magic that challenged his woefully depleted power. Despite the three years in Emerald Station, three years of eating cursed food and with it feeding his own worms within, the vestigial magic caught fire and burned when he said the words.

*Stomp-bash-smash!* The phalanx advanced, and he knew the Imperial Guards were soon upon him too. The paladin traced a rune sign on the cobblestones over which he knelt. On the third trace, white laser light burned through the stone, and the Gaian sigil was revealed.

Atop the Temple of the High Council of the Paladins of Gaia, magic snapped and popped across the steeple. A bolt of lightning shot to the sky and arced across the universe, all the way to Emerald Station. The lightning silently flashed across the clear blue sky where the Emerald Spire starkly cut the high horizon above. Then the thunder rolled. A magnificent winged steed reared up above the sigil to neigh sweetly and proudly. The ephemeral mare glowed with its own light. Its mane was rainbow striped fire. Blue flames lapped over its large hooves and flickered as high as the horse's haunches. The country bumpkins in the cart were aghast, but the phalanx marched forward, *stomp-bash-smash*, unphased by the fiery pegasus unicorn.

Des necked Braido Jr. with his dagger and threw the runt on the big beast's back before he pulled himself up with a handful of flaming rainbow mane. The City Guards were too close, so Des charged the Imperial Guards. She achieved a gallop, beat her wings twice, and was in the air. The Dark Mage watched from the Emerald Fortress as the fiery dot took flight and disappeared into the distance. His evil magic crackled around him in his rage, and many more pigs were killed in Emerald Station that day.



# 15

DAWN came, and the sun ascended in the sky before the Ascendant and their party emerged from the thicket. They walked down the road until the jungle gave way to the land cleared by Braido Goran's ancestors. The path to the big cottage from the cobbled road was of light gray river stones lined by darker gray jungle stones which were rough.

The captain decided Jarrow was the friendliest among them and ordered that the science officer should do the talking.

Jarrow called out, "Hello?" The house was set back a ways from the road, and Jarrow stood at what he thought was a safe distance. The others remained on the road but did not hide. Jarrow yelled, "Hello!" Two piglets appeared near the back of the side of the house and oinked their surprise before disappearing. There was more squealing behind the house.

"Da! *Squeee!* Da! *Squee-squeee!*"

"*Oink-squeee!* Daaa!"

"*Schnaub-squeee!*"

"*Squuuueee!!!*" There were more than two piglets back there.

An old boar of a pig-man, Braido Goran, came running around the side of the house with a pitchfork in his hands. His cloven hooves crunched in the gravel beneath his back-bending knees. He said, "*Rrroink!!! Squeee-schnaub rrroink!*"

Jarrow said, "Hello there, sir! We bring no ill will with us."

It was true, and it wasn't. The moment of truth: "We're on Guild business." Twenty paces behind him, the captain and other Guildsmen squinted their eyes to discern his reaction.

Braido Goran said, "*Oink?*"

Jarrow said, "You know? The Guild of the Greater Good?"

Richard saw the metal pitchfork and got excited about the quantum compass. *Maybe.*

Braido said, "*Oink.* The Guild?"

Jarrow said, "Yessir, that's us." He couldn't read the pig.

Goran's wife Fatpussy appeared next to him at his subtle signal. She said, "*Oink!* Who are these monkeys?"

Braido relaxed and plopped his pitchfork down, points pointing to the sky. Braido and Fatpussy were like American Gothic in Pork. He said, "That one, *oink*, say they from the Guild."

She said just what he'd told her to say. "Oh my goodness, Braido! It's Abrahincoln Georgington done returned to save us from the Dark Lord!"

The captain was happy. The bosun was happy. Jarrow said, "Well actually, ma'am, I'm Jar—"

Braido crouched again and pointed his pitchfork. He stomped his show of simplemindedness. "Don't, *squee-schnaub*, you talk to my wife if you ain't, *oink*, Abrahincoln Georgington. *Squee!* Is you him?"

Jarrow never heard of the man. He said, "Aha! Please excuse me, kind sir. No. I am not him. I'm Jarrow."

Braido stared at him and then told his wife to go inside. "Where's, *schnaub*, Abrahincoln Georgington?"

"I don't know."

Braido relaxed again and eyeballed him. "Say yer from the Guild?"

"Indeed, sir."

"You don't know no, *oink*, Abrahincoln Georgington?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I do not."

"*Oink oink.* They say, *oink*, Abrahincoln Georgington's a

monkey like you lot.” Jarrow looked back at the captain. Captain Atlas nodded at him. Braido said, “*Oink!* You don’t know no Abrahincoln Georgington, monkey-man?”

“No sir, we were on our way to Far Shores in Exland when our ship was lost.” Jarrow got no reaction and went on. “And now we too are lost, and if you could help us, then I can assure you that the Guild will compensate you for your troubles in a most generous fashion.”

Braido paused and pretended to parse it. “Outlanders, huh?”

“I suppose so. Yes, sir.”

“And, *oink*, you don’t know no Abrahincoln Georgington?”

Jarrow’s shoulders slumped a little when he said, “No, sir.”

Braido Goran stared for a good, full, silent minute. Then he said, “*Oink*. You fight, *schnaub*, the Dark Lord?”

Jarrow and them on the road became very happy. “Yes, we do.”

“But, *oink*, you don’t know no Abrahincoln Georgington?”

“No, sir.”

Braido lied, “We, *oink*, hates the Dark Lord ‘round ‘ere.”

“The Dark Lord is our enemy, sir. Our Eternal Enemy, unfortunately.”

Braido looked past Jarrow to the road. “How many, *oink-squee*, outland monkeys you got, *oink*, with ya?”

“About two dozen.”

“‘Bout firteen then?”

Jarrow said, “Aye, ‘bout firteen,” but he didn’t know that number.

Braido said, “That’s all of ‘em?” Firteen Guild outland monkeys would fetch a pretty penny in Emerald Station... if he could get them there.

“Yes, sir.”

“*Oink*. Tell ‘em to come closer and stand—” The ship’s wheel strapped across Captain Atlas’ back caught Braido’s attention. He said, “*Squeee!* You can hear me back, *roink*, there?”

Thirtyseven Double D yelled back, “Yes, sir!”

“Not you, *oinke*. Him.” He pointed. “What dat, *oinke*, on yer back?”

The captain hollered, “It’s my ship’s wheel. I salvaged it after we wrecked.”

Braido mulled it in his mind for a moment and said to Jar-row, “Alright. Have ‘em, *oinke*, come, *oinke*, stand where you are. Never know when, *schnaub*, the Dark Lord’s gonna finally send someone to kill us Gorans. I’m, *oinke*, Braido Goran.”

Braido inspected them and told Ensign Fernando to hand over his knife. The captain as well told him to hand it over, and then he did. Braido stood in front of the captain. In silence, he thought about what the captain had said the night before about killing his family. He said, “Yer the captain?”

The captain said, “I am.”

Braido said, “*Oinke*, that’s a real nice hat.”

“I agree, thank you.” The captain fixed his cover.

Braido pretended to admire the braided gold cord that wrapped ornate nautical knots around the big blue cover, and he thought some more about what the captain had said. He said, “Ain’t, *oinke*, gonna kill old Braido Goran is ya?” He eyeballed the captain with his long snout so close to the captain’s face that he could feel the warmth.

“No, sir.” The captain looked past him to the cottage’s front door. It was old dry wood, nondescript and inornate, and with no skull.

Braido herded the group around the side of the house and showed them his rock garden and bonsai trees which were, indeed, quite nice. The order and beauty allayed the suspicions of the Guild sailors and put the rest at ease. Braido Goran yelled for his family to come outside, and he introduced them. “This, *oinke*, is my oldest Braido Jr.” He introduced his other sons, “This, *oinke*, is Bardo, this, *oinke*, is Berb, this, *oinke*, is Brain, and this guy, *oinke*, is Brian.” He shook Brian from behind as they both faced the party. “Pretty, *oinke*, good for a runt, right?” Then he said to Brian alone, “Pretty good, boy. *Oinke*. You filled out, *oinke*, real well. I’m, *oinke*, proud o’ you.”

The party introduced themselves to Braido's sons, and then Braido introduced his daughters Bumpo, Rumpo, Rolly, Rachel, Rianne, and Piglette. Piglette was so deformed by the worms that she appeared to be a pink potbellied pig with a little girl's face. It was the prettiest face among them, but other than that she was severely deformed. The others walked on two legs, but Piglette walked on four. The bipedal girls wore green dresses not unlike the barmaid back at Barney's. The boys wore red shirts with blue short pants or blue suspender britches. Those that had feet wore shoes, and those with hooves did not. Braido was in blue overalls with a dingy brown blazer, and Fatpussy wore a conservative black dress, ankle length and buttoned at the neck. The Gorans' garb was in complete contrast to the party's thatched, Hawaiian style schmattas and the gleaming, pristine black body suits of the IT guys.

Braido said, "You hungry?" Their affirmation was exceedingly affirmative. He said, "Hey bitch, *oink*. Get these monkeys some food, would ya?"

Fatpussy said, "*Schnaub!* Of course, dear. *Oink*, right away."

Braido said to the party, "Thirsty?" Their affirmation again was exceedingly affirmative, so Braido walked with them to the water well. With his pitchfork in one hand, he cranked the well crank with the other until the bucket appeared. He said, "Ok."

They queued up and drank deeply, and queued up again and drank some more. On his third pass, Muhammad poured the bucket over his head.

He did it to Braido Goran's great displeasure. "*Rrroink!!!* You damn, *rrroink-squeee*, monkey, *oink-rrroink!*" and he cracked Muhammad on the shin with the pitchfork's neck. A trickle of blood appeared. "What you doin', monkey?"

Muhammad said, "Ahh!"

Braido Goran leveled the pitchfork at Muhammad and said, "It's fer drinkin'!"

The captain thought to intervene, but then held the bosun back as he himself hesitated. The rest of the party took the

captain's lead. The pig's rage quickly subsided.

Braido said, "Ya wanna clean, ya have a waller," and he waved his pitchfork to an apparent sty near the stable. Beyond the sty was a long field drawn with fresh furrows.

Muhammad said, "Man!," and held his leg.

Fatpussy appeared on the cottage's back porch. She said, "Braido Goran! How, *oink*, can these monkeys kill, *schnaub*, the Dark Lord if you kill them first?"

"Yeah, well... that's a good point, bitch."

"You be kind, *oink*, to our guests, you hear me?"

"Yer right. Come 'ere."

Fatpussy descended the porch steps and set the large platter of food on the longest of three picnic tables between the house and the well. Braido and Fatpussy both kind of blew their noses a little and kissed by touching their snotty snouts together.

Braido said, "Oh, baby!," and slapped her backside as she set the table.

Jarrow quietly warned the Ascendant to inspect the food before they ate it. "You wouldn't want to come this far to get brain worms," he quietly made it known.

Braido sat, and Fatpussy invited the rest of them to sit. The food was fine, and they ate well, but the Gorans did not eat with them. Braido had money on his mind, but he wasn't going to risk the wrath of the Dark Lord by eating unclean food. The outlanders ate pickled cabbage and pickled turnips. Under ordinary circumstances, Fatpussy would mix the poo into the pickling jars after the veg was already pickled and then let it pickle some more before she sold it off to the merchants that came down the cobbled road thrice a year. The party ate from the primary pickling, and it was pretty good.

At the other table, Rosalie quietly asked Jarrow, "How do we know it's not poisoned?"

Jarrow said, "My analysis shows no worms."

Veronica said, "But it might be poisoned?"

Jarrow nodded his head and said, "Aye."

Trang, who like the rest of them had not eaten in days, said, "I don't care!" and went on eating.

Rosalie shrugged and said, "Well... I suppose." She was very hungry.

Braido watched them eat as he counted imaginary coppers in his head. He said, "*Oink*. Ain't been no outlanders 'round here, *oink oink*, since the days o' Abrahincoln Georgington."

The child's voice from under the porch surprised them when Braido Jr. answered in refrain, "Since the *daaaays* o' Abrahincoln Georgington!"

Braido said, "Get back inside, you. *Oink*, and take yer brothers and sisters with ya." They appeared and marched up the stairs, but Piglette squealed a little laugh and scampered around the side of the house. Brian broke ranks to chase her.

Before Bardo Goran shut the door on the porch, he called out, "Not, *oink*, since the *daaaays* o' Abrahincoln Georgington!"

Braido smiled at the captain who sat to his left. He said, "Kids," and shrugged.

The captain said, "Thank you so much for this fine meal, Mr. Goran."

Braido said, "*Oink*."

The captain said, "I don't suppose you know where a fella could find a shipwright around here do ya?"

Braido said, "*Oink*. A shit right?"

The captain said, "A *shipwright*. A ship builder. Someone who builds sea going vessels."

"Oh, *oink*, a shipwright. Ok."

The captain waited and then said, "Do you know where we could find one?"

Braido Goran did not. He said, "Oh sure, *oink*. There's plenty, *oink-schnaub*, of shipwrights down Emerald Station way. All, *schnaub*, along the pier. Lots of 'em." Emerald Station didn't have a pier.

The captain expressed his relief, and they ate and talked. Then King Sfethen said, "Tell me, Captain, even if we did find

a shipwright and somehow paid for a ship, how would we know how to get back to where we were going?”

The captain said, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way, Sfethen. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Richard wanted Jarrow to ask where Braidó’s metal came from so they could get started on the quantum compass. They all ate Braidó Goran’s food and drank his well water.



# 16

AFTER the poison wore off, the party found themselves tied to the fence around the sty, on the inside. They sat in the mire with their hands tied behind them and their legs tied too, at the feet and at the knees. It was night, and they were greatly troubled. By dawn, Azzam, Trang, Rebekkah, and Naomi were dead. The poison was too strong.

Around the time the rising sun approached the tree line, some of the Goran children, all naked, came to relieve themselves in the sty. They wallowed in their filth and threw clumps of it at the Guildsmen and Ascendant and laughed at them.

Piglette saw Yessica's revulsion and said to Berb, "*Squeee! Squeee!* Make a frowny face, Berb." He did. He smeared gobs of filth around her eyes like eyeshadow and wiped a down-facing curve across her lips. He used his finger to make sure the filth got inside her mouth. Yessica flailed and resisted. She tried to bite Berb's finger, but he was careful not to put it inside her teeth. She screamed, and some of the other women among them screamed as well.

Bicklesworth said, "Garr, ladies. Be quiet now, aye. They love it when ye scream. Aye, they do. Garr." His words went unheeded as Yessica seemed to lose her mind. It was contagious. Piglette frolicked orgasmically. She flipped in the air clicking her hooves together with joy, and the other young pigs

shouted encouragement. The captain didn't say anything but boiled with rage. The bosun shed a tear.

Ensign Fernando, under the cover of the screaming women, whispered to the captain next to him, "I've got another knife in my boot, Captain."

The Goran piglets laughed and squealed as Berb caked Yessica's hair with more filth. The bosun insisted, "Garr! Be peaceful ladies!" but he didn't raise his voice too much, and there was no peace.

Behind them where they were tied facing the barn, facing away from the house, Braido Goran bellowed, "*Rroink-squee!* Get, *roink-squee*, the fuck away from them," and the pigs all fell silent. They were scampering away before Braido finished saying it.

The party heard Braido's footsteps on his slow approach. *Clop... Clop... Clop...* When he opened the gate to the pigpen, he did it extra slow because the creaky hinge made a terrible sound. He paced into their field of vision wearing the captain's bicorne cover.

The women fell silent except for Yessica who was spitting and retching and gasping. The bosun said, "Barr! Be quiet ladies! It's yer terr' that they love. Aye 'tis."

The captain whispered loudly, "Aye, listen to Mr. Bicklesworth. Showing the pain only makes it worse."

Braido Goran looked at the captain. He said, "What you say, monkey-man?"

The captain looked down. He didn't think there was any hope for the ensign's knife with the boot being double cinched. They were sturdy boots. All the clothes from The Sea Star, being of purely natural fiber, were disintegrated long ago. The captain's boots and the bosun's boots made it many years, but only the ensign's leather boots were still there. Maybe he could rip them apart if he could get his hands on them, but Braido Goran did not not know how to tie a knot.

Braido walked by them, one by one. He came to Trang's body and said, "*Squoink?*" She didn't look up, and Braido said,

“*Oink*. You dead?” She didn’t answer, so Braido kicked her in the head with his heavy hoof. “Yep, you dead.”

He walked by Yessica and laughed. He said, “You ain’t seen, *squee*, nothin’, *squee-schnaub*, yet, sweet tits.”

He saw Azzam’s dead body and kicked it several times. He called to his wife, “Fuckin’ shit, *rrroink*, ya fuckin’ stupid, *rrroink-squee*, bitch. Ya poisoned ‘em dead.”

Fatpussy called from the porch, “Oops,” and threw her hands in the air.

Braido said, “Ya stupid bitch, *rrroink-schnaub*, I told you just enough to knock, *squee*,’ em out, ya stupid, *oink*, bitch!”

“Sorry.”

Braido finally came to the captain. He kicked him square in the face with his filthy hooves and smashed the captain’s nose. He said, “*Oink*. Like my new hat?”

The captain looked down where the blood ran onto his bare chest. Braido kicked him in the side of the head, but the captain stayed stoic. Braido said, “*Oink*. Think ya know, *oink*, psychologgio, do ya?” He kicked him in the chest and said, “You don’t know shit.” He looked back over the dead bodies and said, “*Oink*, I guess we’re eatin’ monkey for a while.” Then he called for Braido Jr., and the two of them dragged the four dead bodies out of the sty.

Braido went into the barn, and there was quite a commotion from the sound of it. Braido’s yell, “Yah!,” came out ahead of him. Then he appeared riding a cart pulled by a pink and black spotted pig-donkey and what looked like a regular brown donkey. As Braido rode out, however, they saw the second pig-donkey’s porcine corkscrew tail. Braido heeled the donkeys, dismounted the cart, and went inside.

About an hour later, the party heard the Goran clan come outside. Braido said, “So, *oink*, you know what yer doin’?”

Braido Jr. answered, “Yes, father.”

Braido said, “Alright, *oink*, you best head out now. Watch out, *oink*, fer yer brother. He’s a runt but he’s still a Goran. *Schnaub-schnaub!*”

Fatpussy said, "Be safe and hurry, *oink*, back."

The other children exchanged goodbyes with Braido Jr. and Brian. Then Braido Jr. cracked the whip and yelled, "*Oink!*" The pig-donkeys marched their first steps toward the city where Braido Jr. would negotiate the sale of about fifteen outland Guild monkeys.

Earlier, when Braido was telling his son what to do, he said, "Never mind, *oink*, those dead ones. You tell 'em, *oink*, we got 'bout fifteen and then, *oink*, I'll tell 'em they died later."

As the cart pulled off to destiny, Braido and Berb posted up by the gate to the sty. They leered at the party. Then they strung Azzam up by his feet spread eagle in the barn door. They cut his neck and the blood poured out. Braido removed Azzam's manhood and sliced his body. Berb peeled his skin off yanking the long strips away from Azzam's groin. Braido and Berb cut him down, and Braido butchered him on a table in full sight of everyone.

Later in the day, Fatpussy came out to wallow in the sty. Her six saggy breasts ended in reddish nipples as long as a man's thumb, and wider. She relieved herself and sat down in it. She rolled around in it and covered herself head to toe in muck. After she was thoroughly filthy, she struck a pose like Venus of Urbino and said, "Oh! Excuse me. *Oink*. I didn't see you there," to the women directly in front of her. She said, "Would the lady care, *schnaub*, for a critter fritter?"

The women were all silent. After a long pause, Zohra made the mistake of making eye contact with the sow.

Fatpussy said, "Critter fritter for you then?"

Zohra looked down.

Fatpussy called out loudly to the cottage, "Critter fritter, *oink-schnaub*, for the lady, Berb. Fetch, *oink*, the mouth block."

Berb came out of the cottage and asked what she said from the porch.

"*Squeee!* Get the mouth block, Berb." He ran into the barn once again wearing his red shirt and blue short pants.

Fatpussy rose from her position of leisure and stood in

front of Jarrow. She said, “That’s, *oink*, a fine outfit you’ve got there.” Then she looked to Thirtyseven Double D who was tied further down the fence. “I said, ‘That’s,’ *oink-squee*, ‘a fine outfit you’ve got there!’”

She leaned close to Jarrow, and her nasty tits rubbed on his face as she tried to dig her fingers between his neck and the top of the suit. She couldn’t get them in there. It was seamless. “I’d like a new dress made, *oink*, outta this,” and she tried some more to get a hold of the immaculate suit’s lip, but she could not. She stood and looked at Jarrow and thought for a minute. “You don’t shit in there. It must open up, I just gotta turn you over.”

Jarrow said, “No ma’am, all the waste gets teleported out.” He knew that she would never get her fingers in there. She might rip his head off and dig out his flesh, but she would never wiggle her fingers in at the neck of his top-of-the-line Model IX formfitting Guild gear.

Fatpussy said, “*Oink*. Tele-what?” Jarrow regretted saying anything.

Fatpussy paced down the line. She stopped in front of Sfethen and pulled apart his thatched sarong. She prodded his manhood and laughed at it. “So tiny,” she said. She exposed all the males’ members and laughed at all of them. She said to no one in particular, “*Oink!* I’m gonna, *oink-schnaub*, call you Tiny Tim.”

“*Squeee!* I found it!” Berb said as he appeared in the barn door. He swung the mouth block over his head by the leather strap.

Fatpussy said, “Oh, good. Bring, *schnaub-oink*, it here, Berb,” and she met him at the sty’s gate where she exited.

Berb said, “Which, *oink*, one?”

Fatpussy walked and then said, “This one,” when she stood behind Zohra. Berb yanked her by the hair so her head tilted back through the fence. He held her like that while Fatpussy put the mouth block in Zohra’s mouth. It was like a bridle that held her mouth open, and the sow fastened the strap to the

fence so Zorha's head was stuck. Fatpussy mounted Zorha's head, and, though she had just relieved herself, she squeezed and grunted and was able to defecate a little more into the Ascendant woman's mouth.

Berb laughed as Zohra thrashed and said, "Good one, mom. *Oink-oink*, you got her real, *oink-squee*, good."

Fatpussy pinched Zohra's nose and said, "*Rrrroink-squeee!* You better swallow it now, monkey. You don't, *squeee*, want to choke."

It was seven days to Emerald Station by pig-donkey, and it would be at least another seven days before anyone came for Braidon Goran's prisoners. The sun went down, and the stars came out. There was no moon, but the cool breeze blew, and the party knew the Gorans were done with their torments for the day.

Rosalie had a dream. A beam of light trickled through the trees surrounding the small farm. It fell on her closed eyelids, so she woke up. She sat up in the meager bed of lush green grass and smiled. She thought, *That was the single best night's sleep of all time*. She was still full from the meal Fatpussy served to them the day before.

The prisoner was in a rocking chair, healed, on the porch. When he saw her rise, he said, "Good morning, Rosalie."

"Good morning, love." She stood and stretched. She fanned out her mane of wavy red locks and felt the breeze softly kiss her on the neck. She put her hands on her hips and leaned back until her back popped three times, right where it had been nagging her.

The prisoner heard the pops and said, "Wow, Rosalie. Those were good ones."

She said, "I know, right?" She popped her neck and her fingers and then laid in the wide hammock and rocked.

The bosun said, "What do you want to do today, Rosalie?"

Rosalie said, "Oh, I don't know." Then she popped all ten of her toes, each one like a little bursting bubble in a Christmas present filled with bubble wrap. She said loudly to no one in

particular, “Oh my God! I feel sooo good!”

The captain said, “Good morning, Rosalie, I saved you some pie. Do you want some?”

“What kind of pie is it?”

“It’s pecan pie, silly,” the captain said, “warm and covered with melted butter and whipped cream.”

“Mmmm! That’s my favorite.”

The captain said, “We made it special for you.”

The prisoner said, “Can I get you anything else, love?”

She thought about it and had a decadent thought. Rosalie said, “I want mushroom ravioli.”

The prisoner cringed. He said, “Oh!” and his face and flesh fell away as he said, “Rosalie, no.”

Rosalie joined the men on the porch and ate pie. The sky above was well blue and dotted with poofy white clouds. The dark and bright green leaves in the trees around the farm rustled pleasantly. The old boughs rose and sank in the light wind which drove an undulating wave pattern across the grassy land between. She noticed that the sunbeams shooting through the trees were beautiful. Without thinking, she made a joyous noise, “Ahhh! Hahaha!” The porch was gone. She grabbed two handfuls of grass and threw it up in the air where it drifted downwind. She laughed again and plopped back into the hammock that gently rocked her.

On Braido Goran’s real farm, it was nearing dawn. A pig-mosquito mounted a fencepost on the side of the sty opposite to the party. Its forty-pound hunchbacked body balanced awkwardly on the six spindly legs planted atop that single post. It surveyed the feast and beat its vestigial wings. *Bzzzzt! Bzzzzt!*

In Rosalie’s dream, the hammock swung to the left. *Bzzzzt!* Then it swung to the right. *Bzzzzt!*

The pig-mosquito jumped into the sty and had a lot of difficulty approaching the party because its long legs stabbed deeply into the mud on each step. It slugged forward and saw that the party was fast asleep. Its face was low to the ground, and its hunchback was about two feet higher than its eyes.

*Bzzzz!*

In Rosalie's dream, Piglette said to her, "Whatcha wanna do today, Rosalie?"

Rosalie said, "Best mind your mother, sweet child. You know she doesn't like it when you play around us outlanders." Piglette laughed at her and squealed a cute little girl squeal. Rosalie said, "You don't see many outlanders, do you child?"

Piglette squealed some more. "Outlanders ain't been 'round since the *daaaays* o' Abrahincoln Georgington."

Rosalie sat up in the hammock. She stopped rocking, but the creaky tree still said, "*Bzzzz! Bzzzz!*"

"Who is Abrahincoln Georgington, my dear sweet child?"

"My great-grammer says, she used to say rather, that Abrahincoln Georgington's a monkey same as you."

"That's not nice to call us monkeys."

The tree said, "*Bzzzz! Bzzzz!*," and Rosalie suddenly was miffed.

Piglette said, "Is, *oink*, all outlanders nasty monkeyfolk?"

Rosalie said, "How rude!"

Piglette said, "Ain't s'posed to be, *schmanb*, no such thang as monkeyfolk."

Rosalie said, "What is that sound?"

The tree said, "*Bzzzz! Bzzzz!*"

In the sty, the pig-mosquito liked the salty smell of the bowels of The Sea Star on the remaining petty officer and able seamen. Two hours before dawn, all of them slept. The pig-mosquito sniffed their feet. It had a pig snout where a mosquito's blood sucker usually was. The snout was more like an elephant's trunk than a pig's snout, and the prehensile appendage was distinctly uninsectile. The mosquito closed the distance with the petty officer so it stood directly over him. It covered his face with the prehensile snout and used its feet to put on the paralyzing field. The blood sucker behind the snout plunged into Petty Officer Prall's heart, and the big bug drank deeply. When it was finished with the sailors, its belly was obscenely distended with blood, and it was already dripping water



as its gut separated the nutritious solids.

The bug disturbed Marine before it could put the paralyzing field on her. Next to Marine, Rosalie saw the horrible slimy monster, and they screamed. Several of the other women screamed. The snout covered Marine's face as she flailed in her restraints. Then it mounted her with the paralyzing field and plunged the big gulping phallus into her heart. It gulped until she was dry.

Braido Goran rushed out of the cottage and speared the thing with his pitchfork. That day Braido Goran anally raped the captain. In the evening he did the same to Yulia. The next day, Braido Goran found her dead. He perforated her colon with his gigantic, two-foot-long corkscrew penis. He was gentler when he raped the rest of them but was always far from gentle. Fatpussy and the children swapped the mouth block from mouth to mouth as two weeks passed before the Dark Vassal's cadre arrived from Emerald Station.

# 17

BRIAN struggled foolishly. If he managed to get free, he would surely fall to his death. Emerald Station fell away below them as the fiery pegasus unicorn climbed into the sky. Descriptio LeFranco looked over his shoulder and felt the leery gaze of the Dark Mage chasing him from the Emerald Fortress. Once they cleared Outer Wall, Brian seemed to take note of the mortal danger in falling, so he stopped struggling. The texture of the jungle canopy lessened with their altitude until it was nothing but a green blanket far below.

When Brian stopped struggling, Des said, “There you go, lad. Would you like to sit?”

Brian noticed the danger and then became terrified. He did not answer. Stricken with fear, Brian lay on his stomach in front of the paladin.

Des said, “You might slide off how you are. Let me help you sit properly like I am.” Des helped Brian adjust until he straddled the horse sitting between Des’ arms and the ephemeral magic reigns.

Emerald Station faded away behind them, and Brian became fascinated with the beast’s mane. It was fire that did not burn, and yet it burned with all the colors of the rainbow. Brian yanked the mane, and the pegasus banked hard to the right. Descriptio LeFranco boxed the pig-boy’s ear and righted the

course. He said, "Don't do that." They headed to the boulder field where Des hid his paladin gear before joining the Guild.

It wasn't quite a straight-line course, but the paladin steered toward Ruby Town. He'd approached the city's defensive barrier on foot, but, in flight, he wanted to get a closer look at the apex of the egg-shaped energy bubble that protected the city.

Des asked, "Have you ever been to Ruby Town, boy?"

"No."

"Ever been to Sappho?"

"No."

"Some call it Snoutistan now. Have you been there?"

"*Oink*, I tell ya, mister. Emerald Station's the only city I, *oink*, ever heard of and I never saw it 'fore, *schraub-oink*, today."

The paladin could see that Brian told the truth, so he started softening him for the harder interrogation that would come soon enough. He said, "Did you know there were once eight Great Cities of the Western Lowlands?"

"*Oink*."

"Great Cities are different than ordinary cities because of those big jewels."

"*Oink*."

Des said, "There's seven cities, all the colors of the rainbow, just like Bessie's mane here." Bessie whinnied happily in the sky. "Seven color cities plus the City of Diamonds make the eight Great Cities. The City of Diamonds was destroyed in the last stand of Abraham Lincoln Georgington and his True Men."

That got Brian's attention. "Abraham Lincoln Georgington?"

Des said, "That's right, and after we have a look at Ruby Town, we're going to pass by Diamonds' ruins." What had been a small dot in the distance grew as Des said, "It's hard to make it out from here through that energy shield, but you can just make out the Ruby Spur." The Ruby Spur was the biggest monolith among the remaining seven cities and was second in history only to the Diamond Palantir that once stood proudly in the center of the City of Diamonds, greatest of the Great Cities of the Western Lowlands. "You see it?"

Brian had terrible eyesight like most pigs. He could not discern even the glowing orange force field against the gray backdrop of the mountains from that distance, much less the sliver of jewel within. He said, "No."

As night fell, Des looked back to see the Emerald Spire burning brilliant in the setting sun's last light. He descended and tied Brian to a tree. Then they slept. At dawn, they took flight again. Before noon on the third day, they reached Ruby Town. Des circled above and then descended on the apex of the translucent orange bubble about which they flew in a tight circle. The highest point in the Ruby Fortress, the fortress being constructed atop the Ruby Spur with thematically appropriate red granite, was only two or three cartlengths under the dome. The highest tower was only a flat platform on which a grizzled old wizard stood. His long white beard went almost to his waist, and he wore a gray wizard's cloak. He held his staff high in the air where an electric arc ripped chaotically into the dome above. The wizard stared intently toward the second highest tower of the Ruby Fortress where was a pointed roof supporting a wrought iron weather vane. On Des' second pass around, he caught the wizard's attention and was close enough to see the wizard's eyes widen in surprise. Des waved to him, and the wizard waved back. Des did not make a third pass and instead flew over the mountain toward the City of Diamonds that was.

On the fourth day of flying, Des felt his magic waning, and Bessie broke into a sweat as she beat her wings and trotted across the sky. Under ordinary circumstances, the paladin would have been able to sustain the magic indefinitely. His spirit replenished the magic, drinking it from his life force faster than Bessie used it. The barriers built deep inside, however, those that defended against the worms, cost energy too, and the paladin could not sustain both forever. The disease that permeated his essence sensed his magical depletion and went to war with him. Still, Des judged he could make it to the boulderfall. They flew all day with Brian mesmerized by the

scenery, quiet and still. The gaps in the canopy below sparkled sparsely and then brilliantly with the jewels scattered in the destruction of the diamond city. The tall white horse beat her wings with strength and carried them onward.

Late on the fourth day, the Foibled Mountains appeared as a thin blue ridgeline in the haze coming off the jungle canopy. Beyond, the high plains plateau was a stark line in the sky at an elevated horizon. Near dusk on the fifth day, they flew over the first peaks, and the giant cliff face at the end of the basin loomed in front of them. There were three ridges of mountains, each ridge successively taller until the jungle stopped at the Wall of Failure which was a broad cliff face dwarfing the Foibled Mountains and marking the end of the Great Basin. Atop the cliff was a region known as No Man's Plain where the jungle did not grow. Clouds that made it as far inland as the Wall of Failure dumped their rain there and rarely pushed over.

The great cliff face shed stones as tectonic activity pushed it higher year after year. Des' paladin kit was hidden among them. Land Waster was imbued with magic like the rest of his gear, so he couldn't bring it into the swine city without calling attention to himself, nor to Vineton when he first went to the Guild. When the paladin decided to move on with his mission fleeing Emerald Station's alarm by air, calling attention to himself suited his purposes just fine. He descended on the boulderfall and looked for the landmarks that would guide him.

When he was dispatched from Gaia for his mission as Descriptio LeFranco, he did not know if the Guild would notice his magical gear, so he left it at the base of the Wall of Failure before traveling on foot through the jungle, past the Great Cities, all the way to Vineton far in the south. There, he joined the Guild and studied their arts before his knighting. The High Council in Gaia had sent him thence under the impression that the Guild was corrupted. The Council had it in mind that the Guild was using white magic for evil, but the paladin saw in the course of this mission that such was not the case. He came to

believe that the Guild's knowledge of magic was rudimentary at best. Certainly, Guild Knights of the common ranks were not magic users.

Des investigated trails of dark magic in the Guild: trails which surely would have been known to the High Council in any case. He found none. Instead, he came to believe that the worms had mutated such that the life force itself had been stricken with magical cancer that was itself a new source of dark magic in creation. The cancer was destroying everything good in every realm it touched, and then Des volunteered to enter Emerald Station to collect more information. Des first entered Emerald Station when he was 247 years old.

Des scanned the boulderfall and found his marker, so Bessie landed them on it. Des shoved Brian off, and he hit the ground hard where he yelped, "*Squeee!*"

Des dismounted and stroked Bessie's nose as she panted her exhaustion. He said, "That's a good girl."

Bessie neighed and rose on her hind legs and kicked with her front. She became lightning once again and returned to Gaia. The thunder boomed, and the lightning faded. A bright rainbow marked Bessie's journey home before it too quickly faded. The sun was down. The paladin turned his attention to the pig.

Des' magic was exhausted. He would do the interrogation the old-fashioned way. Des said, "What am I going to do with you?"

Brian said, "*Schnaub? Oink?*"

Des said, "Yes. What am I going to do with you?" He pulled the leather knapsack from the crag where he stashed it before traveling to Vineton two decades before. Brian cowered as he sensed the sudden absence of the paladin's formerly cordial demeanor. The paladin pulled the scabbard of his triple broad magical bastard sword from the same shallow crag and said, "Tell me who I am."

Brian said, "How, *oink*, should I know, mister?"

Des' magic was spent, but his psychic powers remained. He

put fear on the young pig. Des said, "I'm death."

Brian squealed and tried to run away, but Des tripped him with Land Waster's scabbard. Again, Brian tried to flee, but the paladin stepped on his leg as he scooted. Brian squealed more loudly.

The paladin said, "Look at me."

The pig reluctantly turned over.

The paladin said, "Why were you in Emerald Station?"

*"Oink-squeee! Rrroink!!!"*

"I know about the outlanders. Why were you in Emerald Station?" He scanned the pig's mind but got nothing he didn't already know. He tied the pig and retrieved his sword. He unwrapped the oiled rags and slid it into the scabbard. Then the paladin approached the pig. He unsheathed an inch of Land Waster and let it twinkle in the starry moonlight. "Tell me now!"

Brian said, "*Rrroink!* I were just, *roink-squeee*, goin' wif mah bruvah!"

Des believed him and said, "Tell me everything. Who were you going to see?"

Brian said, "*Rrroink-squeee!!!* I don't know nuffin."

Again, the paladin believed him but kept the questions going. Nothing passed through the boy's mind other than that which Des garnered the moment he walked through Outer Gate. Braido Jr. was the one he wanted. *Oh well.* The paladin drove Land Waster into the young pig's heart and watched him gurgle blood until he was dead. Then he slept.

The paladin knew he wouldn't be strong enough to call Besie any time soon, and there was no hope of getting to the Goran place before the pigs from Emerald Station did. He would march back and investigate the scene. If possible, he would interrogate the family.

Des' gear was hidden among the boulders about two miles from what was called the Valley Road even though he was high in the Foibled Mountains. He thought about casting out the brain worms and reverting to monkey form but decided against

it. He would stay porcine until he was well clear. In the morning, Des hiked to the road but left his armor behind. It didn't fit his pig body.



# 18

GIVEN the patience acquired watching entire lives unfold and suffer on The Sea Star's mizzen mast, the two weeks of brutality was not as bad as it might have been. They all sat through worse, relatively, decades at a time. Still, The Sea Star and their own corporeal lives on Earth, and even their recent time on the beach, seemed very far away. On the sixteenth day, they heard metal wheels rolling down the road, and then they heard voices.

Captain Stenchington of the City Guards and Captain Bankypork of the Imperial Guards accompanied a platoon of GFB regulars: regulars in the Eternal Enemy's army. The Dark Lord's appearance in Emerald Station preceded two GFB divisions from the north which arrived the day after Descriptio LeFranco made his escape. The platoon dispatched to Braido Goran's farm was also accompanied by Baron Calvin Eitherway, the third ranking Dark Vassal in Emerald Station. Eitherway called all stop and dismounted his enormous pink and black war boar, seven feet tall at the shoulder. The two captains rode pig-horses, and the GFB officer, Grub Lieutenant Odark Piledung, drove a chariot pulled by two smaller war boars. Behind them, the platoon marching in four ranks halted as did two prison carts in the rear pulled by pig-donkeys. The donkeys' drovers were City Guards.

The grub lieutenant blew his horn to announce their presence, but everyone already knew they were there. Braido Goran went out to meet them and negotiate a price. He asked about his sons, and Piledung said, “*Roink-roink*, they’s probly, *roink*, a day or two ‘hind us.”

The troops untied the Ascendant who were brutalized but not yet broken. The Ascendant were generally of a resilient disposition, and the Guildsmen were also very strong. They were herded into the prisoner transport carts. The regulars used the blunt ends of their spears to prod the outland monkeys up the two squat steps behind each cage and through the corroded iron doors. Braido and the four ranking representatives from Emerald Station continued their discussion in front of the house.

Jarrow murmured a few words of encouragement to Rosalie, and one of the GFB pigs roinked, “No tawkin’!!!”

Jarrow didn’t hold his tongue. “Well, you see, sir, it simply—”

The guard said, “Shut up!” and stabbed his spear sideways through Jarrow’s chest, in through the armpit and out above the other shoulder. Jarrow fell to the cobblestones, and the soldier braced his hoof against Jarrow’s ribs to pull the spear out. A fountain of blood shot from the wound, and the Guild’s faithful servant JRR Zero returned to the source.

Rosalie screamed, and the party made a general commotion. Another guard whacked Rosalie in the head with his metal gauntlet and knocked her out cold. She would have been able to escape with the others if she remained conscious, but then everything about all the universes would have been different if Rosalie never made it to Emerald Station. There was violence all around, and the party fell silent once again.

The one who knocked Rosalie said, “*Oink-schnaub*. Pull her up.”

Bosun Bicklesworth reached down and took her arm where she collapsed against the cart without falling fully to the ground. He lifted her as gently as he could, and then the guard

herded Yessica and Alexandra in behind her. The guard slammed the gate and popped a padlock on it.

Richard asked, "Is she breathing?"

The soldier said, "No tawkin'!", and jammed his spear into the cage, but none were gored by his thrust.

The captain exchanged glances with Ensign Thierry in the other cart. He could give his man no strong reassurance, and the ensign hung his head low. Filthy, naked, and stinking, those in the other cart numbered a few more on account of the big men's breadth. They looked to the cottage but could not discern what was being discussed with Braido Goran. Fernando's boots were gone. Fatpussy found his knife on the second day.

Their lives on Earth had been mostly miserable. The Sea Star was a strange dream. Quarters in the cart were dreadfully tight. Rosalie lay prostrate while Fátima, Anne, Alexandra, and Yessica shared the single bench. The bosun, the captain, and Richard stood and stared intently at the object of their impotent rage. Braido argued while Ensign Fernando squatted next to Rosalie. He held pressure where her head bled. King Sfethen, silent and morose, and whose life on Earth was not horrible, and who had never known defeat, stared away from the farm, into the jungle. He thought, *The jungle bears good tidings.*

Braido Goran went inside his cottage, and the Eternal Enemy's ranking servants appraised the prisoners. Baron Eitherway saw Jarrow's corpse and said, "*Squeee!* Alive you fool! We need them alive!" The troops stood at attention, silent. "Who did this?"

Private Plop said, "*Oin—*," and the baron closed the distance with super pig speed. He jammed his poniard into Plop's ear. His eyes rolled back, and he died.

The baron looked at Piledung whose man he killed. Piledung didn't know what to say. He was sure he was about to die, so he said simply, "Yes, sir!"

The baron leered at him and then shook the gate on the jail wagon. It was secure. He said, "Make sure the other wagon is

secured, Piledung.”

Piledung shook the other gate hard enough that the four lanterns hanging off the cage’s exterior corners clanged and rattled. Piledung said, “Secure, m’lord.”

Baron Eitherway said, “Very well then, Grub Lieutenant. Prepare to move out.”

Piledung was very happy. He said, “Platoon! Make, *rrroink*, ranks!” and the forty-seven enlisted pigs almost made four ranks of twelve.

Captain Stenchington told his men, the drovers on the jail carts, to turn around.

Piledung said, “Right! Face!!!” The platoon executed a fine right face. Piledung said, “Forward! March!!!” The platoon started marching toward Emerald Station. Piledung called commands and steered the column of pigs around the two carts that blocked each other from turning all the way around. He marched them back onto the road and halted them. “Platoon! Halt!”

The two captains and the baron mounted their mounts. The City Guard captain yelled instructions to the cart drivers.

King Sfethen nudged the captain and said, “Look.” He pointed into the jungle.

The captain said, “What?”

“There.”

“I don’t— Oh!”

Bruce’s lifeless corpse descended from the low-hanging branches directly next to the road, about four feet away. His skin was pale and bloodless. His lifeless head hung limply to the side. The gray-brown flesh of his corpse was riven with green prehensile vines that suspended his body about four feet off the jungle floor so he hung eye to eye with the prisoners. The cart driver was yah-ing his donkeys, and Captain Stenchington yelled loudly.

Richard too saw Bruce and said, “Brucey?”

Bruce’s cadaver didn’t respond, but the tangle of vines shook his limp corpse and made the head nod forward, and

then roll back. Bruce reached out with a viney tentacle that slithered through the metal loop on the padlock. Bruce flexed, but he could not pop the lock. He relaxed and reached another tentacle through the loop and then flexed again. The lock popped. It was very loud like a gunshot. The baron and the Imperial Guard Captain were near the platoon. The second jail cart was between them when they heard the sound.

Bruce abandoned discretion and came onto the road. Like an entire briar patch, he was very large. He ensnared Captain Stenchington and his horse in a mass of thorny green limbs. The freed and dismounting prisoners heard the captain's gurgle and the crunching bones of his pig-horse when the GFB platoon charged.

Richard paused to help pull Rosalie out of the cart, but Bosun Bicklesworth said, "Narrr! Away! Leave us!" so he dashed into jungle with the others.

The captain and the bosun lifted Rosalie and were about to exit when the baron's magic fireball blasted them. It blew the cage clean off the cart, and the two Sea Star men landed on the grass in Braido Goran's front yard. Another fireball shot past them and engulfed Bruce just as the platoon clashed with him. They hacked at Bruce's burning branches as he wrapped around them and broke their bones. With an array of biting fly trap mouths, he crushed their heads and bones with tentacular constriction.

Disoriented only for a moment, Captain Atlas looked at Bicklesworth who stumbled as he tried to stand. The captain looked at the cottage where his wheel stood next to the unpainted door. The captain made a dash for it.

On a flaming bed of prehensile vines, Bruce slithered on the discordant formation of hapless, ill-equipped GFB pigs. He crushed them and burned them as he himself burned. The GFB pigs rapidly reduced the number of vines that constituted his tangled and monstrous form. He was little more than a meaty carcass floating on a bed of vegetable tentacles as he snared and killed more pigs.

Ensign Fernando and King Sfethen rushed out of the jungle to help the bosun who was still reeling. Piledung commanded his troops, “Fall back!!!”

Braido Goran appeared at the cottage’s outer door and charged the captain. The captain didn’t break his stride when he punched the pig clean on the snout and knocked him out cold. The strap was still on the wheel, and the captain hoisted it onto his back. He took his hat from Braido Goran and made his dash for the jungle.

Baron Eitherway fired another fireball at Bruce, this one blue where the first two were red. It froze most of Bruce solid.

Piledung said, “Attack!” and his few remaining pigs charged. Bruce broke away from his frozen tentacles, but his core was exposed. The pigs hacked away the rest of his limbs, and he died.

The pigs turned their attention to the Ascendant man and three Guild Sailors in the open. The captain sprinted across the yard with astonishing speed given his girth and what with the weight of the wheel on his back. He changed course and ran for the jungle to his right. The bosun regained his wits and sprinted behind the captain with Sfethen and Fernando. Once they were beyond the tree line, Piledung called off the trailing pigs and told them not to pursue. The four men, however, charged deep into the jungle and did not abate in their escape. Across the road, Richard, Fátima, Anne, Alexandra, and Yes-sica fled the same.

Grub Lieutenant Piledung reformed his remaining soldiers. In the explosion, the prison cart flipped and landed on top of Rosalie but did not crush her where she lay in a gap of the debris. She was loaded into the remaining cart while Braido Goran lay unconscious in front of his cottage. The Goran family peered out the windows as the other servants of the Eternal Enemy departed for Emerald Station.

Rosalie regained consciousness after a few hours. Thirtyseven Double D cradled her head on the floor of the crowded cart. He said, “Rest now, Rosalie. Just rest.” The

cart rolled onward toward Emerald Station. Rosalie's sick, painful moaning foreshadowed what was to come, and they all knew it.

# 19

DESCRIPTIO LeFranco sat and thought about his breath and turned his mind's eye toward himself. The worm disease took ground while his magic was diverted to Bessie's incarnate form, but he pushed it back and felt no threat. By then, the pig-ravens had long flown from Emerald Station. Every sinister station in the land soon sent searchers to secure the paladin's swift seizure. He retained his pig form, though he could walk the road quicker as a monkey, and though the river would be a high-speed highway in his real form. Be that as it may, once he expelled the worms he could not simulate the signature of dark magic with paladin magic, so he set out on the long journey ready to deceive the deceivers. Sensing no pigs in the vicinity, he sang *Zippity Doo Dab*, and a little blue pig-bird did land on his shoulder.

The paladin said, "Hey there, Mr. Pig-bird. What are you up to?"

The bird squeaked, "*Chirp-chirp*," and then, with surprising oomph for such a tiny creature, it said, "*Oink*," and squirted a little white spot onto the paladin's tunic. The paladin smiled at the silly, stupid bird. It stayed still and did not fly away, so he shooed it and wiped the spot with some leaves.

The paladin walked during the day and slept at night. When he felt his battle against the brain worms edging back to the



status quo, he jogged during the day and alternately walked until he came to Abrahincoln's River which was known by then colloquially as The Diarrhea Squirts. The paladin knew at least five waterfalls on the Wall of Failure that fed into Abrahincoln's River. He did not know if the waterfalls dumped the headwaters down from No Man's Plain or if they were only tributaries with the true headwaters lying further north along the basin.

The High Council of the Paladins of Gaia had no knowledge of the land to the north of the Great Cities of the Western Lowlands, once eight, but then seven, and not great but rather rotten. Even high in the sky when the paladin gazed to the north, there were no visible features, only endless seas of green. Even then, he knew that Amethyville and Topaz Town were out there far to the north of the east-west line through Emerald Station and the ruins of the City of Diamonds. Doing research before the High Council dispatched him, he'd come across a scroll scripted with the words *Here Be Monsters* over the land to the north of Amethyville.

On the way down to the basin, Des woke from a pleasant dream that quickly faded. Orange and crimson hues of pink dawn swept across the clouds and over the Foibles' stark peaks. His stomach rumbled, but there was no food. The high jungle was barren. On that day, the road crossed Abrahincoln's River. He went down to the riverbank where an ancient bridge crossed the water along a disused road that had been eaten by the jungle. He stripped and washed in the chilly water. It was a pleasure to wash in clean water where the well water in Emerald Station was never so. Too often, the Emerald Station wells doubled as unofficial latrines of convenience.

The paladin scrubbed the sweaty grime from the warty wrinkles of his scuzzy snout. Seeing the snout between his eyes was something he'd grown accustomed to, but touching it was something else altogether. Des said, "Soon," to no one in particular. Soon he would cast the Dark Mage's filth out of himself and be done with it forever. Soon wasn't then, so he

washed quickly and bore the uncomfortable sensation of scrubbing along the heightened tactile sensitivity of his snout.

Des dried in the morning air and ate a petrified length of peppered jerky from his pack. He drank from the stream copiously and gnawed the cured meat. It was still good after sitting hidden for so many years. The sun rose, and the warm sunbeams struck the riverbank where he bathed in them.

The paladin soon returned to the task at hand and began a survey of the nearby trees. He found one suited to his purpose with a twisted L-shaped trunk. A log like that wouldn't roll in the water. He drew his magical sword and hew it down in one blast of splinters. It fell into the river where he cleaved the small branches and rode it downstream.

In the Foibles, the river ran to the south until the end of a long range, and then to the north, and then to the south again before spilling out onto the basin proper. Des knew the river would pass under Basin Road 9 which became the Coast Road at Emerald Station. Abrahincoln's River would run under the Coast Road itself to the southwest of the green city, much closer to the Goran farm.

Food was more plentiful in the lowlands. Once, the wide river became too broad and shallow, and his log was lodged on a sandbar. He walked until he could float another tree from the lush green walls that lined the riverbanks.

In the mountains and in the basin, he passed under nine bridges. Some were stone and some were wood, and one was stone and wood. The tenth bridge was mossy stone beneath Basin Road 9. There, the road crossed the river high above three tiers of nested level arches, and it was the paladin's first encounter with the GFB since he and Bessie blew town with Brian. On the road downstream from the paladin and high above, the GFB marched away from Emerald Station. The formation was already crossing when the bridge came into view, and Des judged that at least two battalions crossed. The foot soldiers were followed by a contingent of six pig-elephants and a company mounted on war boars. When they passed, the

paladin waited an hour before he pushed off the bank and floated under. There were rapids upriver from Basin Road 9, but the downriver stretch was calm all the way to the sea.

Early one morning, the creatures of the river signaled dawn's approach, and Des was surprised to be woken by something other than a pig-bird. Apes and monkeys thrived in the jungle during time of Abraham Lincoln Georgington, but the worm disease killed them all. There were no pig-monkeys and no pig-apes. The big cats that hunted them died out with their prey. The monkeys were very loud in the jungle in times long gone, but in the time of the Dark Mage, the cacophony of the pig-birds ruled the dawn.

On one particular morning, a family of pig-otters splashed and chirp-oinked in the water. Des saw five pink and gray otters chirp-oinking like aquatic pit bulls half as large as himself. Six otter pups ran out of what could have been a den or debris. The paladin stood and gained the attention of the parents who oink-barked their displeasure. Des donned his sword and pack and pushed off the bank to set sail for the day, but the otter family slid into the water and encircled the intruder. With just their little noses and the tops of their heads visible above the calm water, they harassed him.

*Oink-bark! Chirp!*

*Chirp! Oink-chirp!*

They followed the intruder as the current carried him, but then they swam back upstream. Des floated along the swift yet calm river until the massive stoneworks of the Coast Road bridge came into view. The paladin's eyesight was very good despite the general porcine affliction of poor vision, and he saw the sentries on the road long before they saw him. He did not know that he was spotted from the road further upstream two days earlier while snoozing on the log and not fully attending his psychic powers. At the Coast Road, he gleaned from the posted pigs' minds that they were looking for him, and then he arrived. He pulled the raft to the bank and low-crawled across the beach and into the jungle upriver from the bridge.

Des approached the bridge on foot and under the cover of the foliage. Where the terrain forced him briefly back onto the sandy bank, he crossed another romp of pig-otters. The big male craned his head to look at Des and then lay back down without a sound, lazing and legs akimbo, soaking in the sunlight through his furry belly. Des pushed on.

The storm that had been building released its first rains. Des knew there was only a short antediluvian moment before the rain turned to a torrent, so he risked rising to the road before the steep canyon walls might become impassably muddy. The western side of the canyon was an exposed cliff with no cover, so Des would climb on the east before the mud slides could begin. When he reached the road, its stone retaining wall was fifteen feet high. Des found a tree growing close enough that he could shimmy up between, and there he mounted the road.

The rain became a torrent which shielded him from the pigs' vision. Des sensed the proximity of pigs hidden in the deluge, so he set his sack on a branch overhanging the road. The paladin said to his sword, "I suppose it's you and me, old friend." More quickly than it started, the rain stopped, and he was spotted.

"Halt!" one of the two pigs said. The other one blew a shrill whistle.

Des charged into them. He parried their spears with the broad side of Land Waster, his triple broad bastard sword. He dealt them magical killing blows which both cleaved them and made their halves appear to have swallowed grenades. Des ran for the bridge. A squad of pigs charged forth, and an officer on a war boar lead the pack. The officer tried to ride the paladin down, but Descriptio LeFranco lunged forward and slapped the boar on the side of the head with Land Waster's broad edge. The head was completely obliterated. Exploding bone fragments and chunks of flesh sprayed over the road's edge into the gorge. The two-thousand-pound body of the boar made a hard right turn behind its mistified head, but Des

stabbed the rider in a follow-on thrust and picked him from the saddle. The rest of the pigs skidded to a halt as Des stabbed the wounded officer a second time for good measure. Des menaced the remaining pigs with a triumphant foot on their captain's corpse.

The paladin said, "Who wants some?" He scraped Land Waster's tip across the road before him in a semicircle. From the stones, a thin blue flame burned bright about six inches high. The pigs blew whistles, and then another he couldn't see blew a horn on the bridge. The paladin charged, and the flame maintained its sharp arc in front of him. Like a battering ram, the pigs could not cross the low line of fire. Like a solid shield before his charge, the line of fire deflected their strikes and bowled their bodies but allowed the paladin to gore them. He made them explode with Land Waster's magical concussion. When the pigs he could see were dead, the paladin released the invisible shield. The fire was extinguished when he made his final dash for the bridge. Steaming cobblestones cooked in the summer sun so the pigs on the bridge saw Des emerge like a marauder from the mirage.

The reserve contingent of regulars charged. A full platoon of forty-eight pigs, they were more feral warthog than the round pigs of Emerald Station. Behind them, they were commanded by one clad in unholy armor against which Land Waster's magic would have no effect. The commander blew the horn again. On the fly, Des sheathed the sword and took shuriken from the leather belt at his chest. Even after years, the powerful purple poison adhered to the killing faces. The GFB hogs nearly met him when the paladin threw left and right handfuls of three throwing stars until all fifteen flew. The pigs behind tripped over the spazzing bodies of those affected by his nerve agent. The paladin dove in and killed the rest of them in close combat.

Only the mounted officer remained. High in the saddle, his unholy armor was a black scar on the paladin's psyche. The rider lowered his lance and charged. The paladin parried it and

stabbed the hog in the chest as the boar bore on. Even without magic, Land Waster was a great sword and very sharp, and Des stabbed the hog through the heart, even through the heavy steel of the cursed breast plate. Des dashed down the road and crossed the bridge. On the other side, he untethered a brawny beast of a pig-horse, rode back for his pack, crossed again, and the next pig he saw was Fatpussy Goran.

About a half day by pig-horse from the Goran farm, Fatpussy heard the paladin's horse's hooves clopping as he came closer. She got up from where she lay by the roadside in her hopelessness and tried to hail him as her hero. The paladin quickened to a canter and met her. He was disappointed when he scanned her mind.

Fatpussy's black dress was torn and her two top breasts were exposed. Wrinkled with stretch marks, the deflated flopping bags looked like scrotal skin other than the enormous red nipples. She said, "*Oink, rroink?!?*"

Descriptio LeFranco said, "Get back, sow."

Fatpussy said, "*Rroink-squeee!!! Please!!!*"

Then the paladin chopped her on the forehead and kicked her in the face from his saddle to dislodge the sword. The paladin rode on past sunset and reached the Goran farm around midnight. The whole place was burned and scrubbed clean of any traces, magic, psychic, or otherwise. It was the work of Dark Vassals. The paladin had ridden hard into the night and was very tired. He made a bed of fronds in the bottom of the scorched and overturned prison truck, and then he slept lightly.

The high-pitched howling of coyotes woke the paladin in the morning. Six of them circled the cart and snarled intimidation. In the pre-dawn light, he saw that they were not pig-coyotes, but healthy animals like sly, skittish dogs. Land Waster had slid in the night down the angle of the overturned cart's bed and was just out of reach. The paladin slid down to grasp it, and even his slightest motion scared the pack away. They ran down the road and into the jungle and did not return.

Des looked to his pig-horse that spooked yet was safe and sound.

The paladin slept until mid-morning. He paced the property but found no clues. All day, he cast about in the surrounding jungle. Though Fatpussy's mind had told him of the outlanders' partial escape, Des was no ranger and did not see their subtle sign in the jungle. In the evening, he knew nothing more than he knew in the morning, which was not much. He said to the horse, "What do you think?"

The horse didn't answer.

Descriptio LeFranco wondered if he should head for the coast, or if he should head south to Vineton and debrief the Guild on his time as City Guard Durr Badminton. Undecided and free from the watchful eye of his enemy, the paladin made camp and then cast a spell of revelation. He concentrated and looked for a kernel of magic. He looked back and forth across the jungle wall that surrounded the land cleared by Braido Goran's ancestors. He saw nothing to the west, nothing to the north, nothing in any direction, and then he looked again.

On second glance, the paladin noticed a line of sorts cutting through the chaotic irregularity of foliage at the jungle's edge. The paladin concentrated on the line, and it slowly widened. The forest fell away as the line expanded. Though he remained seated near the fire, its light faded. The line grew wider, and the jungle receded about a black, growing emptiness. The paladin stayed firm and invested himself in his doing until a squat obelisk, twice as tall as a man, appeared in the space revealed by his magic. Though it was night, the distant horizon through the gap swirled with purple and gray clouds like stormy twilight. Lightning flashed from the apex of the obelisk. The attendant thunder spooked the pig-horse which broke its tether and ran away. The paladin had cast the spell of revelation many times but had neither seen nor heard of anything like the magical vision before him then.

The power in the turbulence of the storm behind the obelisk was like nothing he'd felt before. He felt it could roll over

Emerald Station, the whole GFB, and all the way to Gaia and beyond if that obelisk wasn't there to hold it back. The only paladin among the Guild of the Greater Good approached the spot where it stood, and he knew he should go to the coast. Then the wide line contracted, and his vision was replaced by the undular but uninteresting jungle wall. He departed at dawn for the coast.



# 20

THEY didn't notice the breeze fade away on the march inland. As they neared the sea, however, the breeze blew up the jungle tunnel, and it was a nice change. The captain, the bosun, Ensign Fernando, and King Sfethen saw the bright light appear at the end of the tunnel, and then they were on the beach again. They were happy, and they rejoiced in the moment, but then the darkness returned. They washed in the tide and found fronds from which they fashioned new attire.

King Sfethen said, "Gentlemen, I am compelled that this is not the same creature." He gazed toward the nearby seraph. The others gazed at it.

The ensign said, "I don't think it's different."

The bosun said, "Darr! Do ya be sure, King Sfethen?"

Sfethen said, "No, but study yonder wingtips. They are eccentric."

The captain said, "I see it. Those angles on the end?"

"Yes, Captain."

The captain said, "I saw others like that further back."

"Did you?"

"Aye," the captain said. "You're right. They're eccentric, but I noticed 'em on another."

King Sfethen thought about it. "Hmmm... I suppose."

The bosun said, "Yarr, I noticed them like that too, back

down ‘atta way.” He waved his hand down the long line of seraphim that dotted the beach until they disappeared in the distance.

King Sfethen said, “All is well then,” but he cast a suspicious eye at the monolith which seemed amiss to him.

On the third day back at the beach, the captain was in deep thought inspecting The Sea Star’s former wheel. He said, “Goran said there were shipwrights further on down the road.”

The bosun said, “Aye, he said it.” He locked eyes with the captain and said very slowly, “Yarr. Surely. The pig. Did.”

The captain said, “What other options are there?”

“Hurr. Options, eh? Yarr.” Bicklesworth cast a gaze down the long beach. “Reckon they’re still sitting where we left ‘em?” The bosun reckoned they were.

The captain said, “I don’t see why they would have moved.”

The ensign said, “We could catch up with Rick and Zorp if we double timed it. It’s a years-long journey, aye, back across all these bird ladies.” Indeed, it would take them many years to get back to the seraph with swept wings where, presumably, they would find the group that stopped marching.

King Sfethen said, “They’re barely down the beach by now from where we parted ways.”

The captain said, “Aye. Reckon so.”

King Sfethen said, “What about the other cart?” No one had mentioned the second cart of lost souls since the company parted ways at Braido Goran’s place.

The captain said, “We must consider them lost.”

The bosun said, “Bo! Lost, aye,” and hung his head.

The ensign said, “Emerald Station must be a pig city, what good would a pig shipwright do?” Far down the road, agents from that pig city were killing the Goran family and burning their farm.

The captain hated to hear it but said, “Aye.”

King Sfethen said, “We should wait for Richard and the ladies. They all made it into the wood. They might come back this way.”

They all said, “Aye.”

The captain said, “If we head fer a shipwright or if we head back down the beach, we should go back and kill those pigs in any case.”

They all said, “Aye,” but those pigs were dead or dying, and Fatpussy would be too, soon enough.

Fruits and fish were in abundance along the coast, and the four recovered from their traumas. No one from The Sea Star ever saw Richard, Alexandra, Anne, Fátima, or Yessica again. Much later, after the survivors returned to Exland, the Guild recorded their fates: *Lost at Sea*.

After months on the beach, Descriptio LeFranco emerged into their midst from the Coast Road. They didn’t notice him, and he said, “Hail!” The four became very angry at the sight of the pig and ran to kill him. The paladin saw that the four were not pigs, so he hesitated in his own inclination to kill them first. He said, “I’m with the Guild,” and he formed the secret hand signs, several of them, with attendant psychic signature.

The three Guild Navy men stopped and told King Sfethen to stop. The ensign answered the paladin in kind. The paladin signed again, but the ensign did not know the reply. The captain stepped forward and answered in kind. Then he said, “Why are you a pig?”

The paladin told them about his Guild mission but did not disclose his Gaian mission. As Descriptio LeFranco spoke, his attention was drawn repeatedly to the seraph with pointed wingtips and the sand where the prisoner’s bones were buried. Secret knowledge or not, the captain did not trust the paladin. He told him to sit away from them while they deliberated.

The paladin said, “Of course, I’ll be over here.” He walked to the seraph, and the prisoner’s presence became overwhelming to him like the obelisk had overwhelmed him.

After the derealization engine fired during the final destruction of The Sea Star, Rosalie and the prisoner spiraled in ecstasy until she was gone, and he was gone from her. He realized everything that could be realized, and then he floated

alone but for a formless dragon for a long time, much longer than the time passed for the others. Then the paladin's hands scooped the sand away from his bones. The prisoner realized that he was only buried, and not formless, so he struggled to free himself from the sand.

King Sfethen said, "I knew there was something!"

The bones rising from the beach shocked the Guildsmen. They recognized the prisoner and rushed in.

The bosun said, "Yarr! It's ol' Bonesy! Ay, Bonesy. Bo! Hurr!"

The captain told the paladin to get back. The prisoner was stuck fast and could not free himself. As they dug the sand, a tremendous black claw was revealed. The tip was lodged between the prisoner's leg bones. They dug some more, and then the prisoner was able to stand free among them. The claw extended beneath the foundation that supported the seraph statue.

The ensign said, "Captain! Look!" and pointed to the sea. A ship sailed in silhouette on the horizon.

The captain and the bosun both exclaimed, "The Grim Ghost!" The array of the long ship's seven masts was unmistakable.

King Sfethen said, "We're saved!" The many-masted vessel was a welcome sight, but the sailors' excitement faded as quickly as it rose. The ship turned and closed on their position. While it did, the bosun recounted for the prisoner everything that happened after the octopus destroyed The Sea Star. The paladin was privy to it all.

The paladin told them, reluctantly, the likely fate of the those hauled away in the second cart.

The ship approached the shore and set launches to pick the men up. Mr. Black was first on the beach. He said the other survivors from The Sea Star, both groups, those who stayed and those who went further, were already aboard The Grim Ghost.

Bicklesworth said, "Barr! Let's blow this jernt."

The captain waited to board last and said to the prisoner, “All aboard now.”

The prisoner said, “I’m not going with you.”

The bosun said from the launch, “Narr, Bonesy. We’s gotta getya to Exland, aye. Yarr, Exland, tarr.”

The prisoner said, “No. I’m going after Rosalie. She’s alive. I can feel it.”

The captain said, “You can’t. One man versus an army of pigs? It’s a fool’s errand, man!”

The prisoner clanked his bony hands on his bleached white ribs and said, “What are they gonna do? Kill me?” They pleaded with him, but the prisoner was resolute. He said, “You might leave her, but I never will.”

The bosun said, “Narr, Bonesy! Narr, ‘tweren’t so. We’ve gotta take ya to Exland. Barr, it’s the mission, aye. Not raidin’ pig cities. C’mon.”

The prisoner didn’t respond at all. They made a few more pleas, and he ignored them staring up instead to the sky beyond the big thing’s bulbous breasts. Rays of sunshine came down between the cleavage, and he gazed into the sun. It didn’t hurt his eyes. He didn’t have any.

Then the captain shoved off, debeached, and boarded the skiff. He said, “Yer a fool, Bonesy. Yer fate lies with us, not out there.”

Sitting atop the foundation stones like a bauble at the seraph’s paw, the prisoner anxiously tapped his heel bones on the base. The dragon from the dereality dream lay buried beneath. The seraph was its gravestone. The angle on the claw said the megalithic structure would have to move before the dragon could be unburied. It would take a long time to dig Draghor out, but that was time Rosalie didn’t have. With the departing party rowing through the surf, the prisoner ran down the road toward Emerald Station.

# 21

ON the way back to Emerald Station from their decimation by Bruce's tentacles, the surviving pigs and their jail cart encountered another company of GFB regulars. Their officer, Captain Moldyfood, rode ahead of the soldiers that marched on foot. He said, "Greetings, *schnaub*, to the Baron Eitherway."

Baron Eitherway leered aloofness down at him from his war boar twice as tall as the captain's own. He said nothing.

Captain Moldyfood said, "Lieutenant, *rrroink*, Piledung! Report!"

Piledung explained what happened at the farm.

The baron said, "*Schnaub-schnaub*. What are your orders, Captain Moldyfood?"

"Secondary, *squee*, support, *schnaub*, for your expedition, m'lord."

"And specifically?"

"We're to, *oink*, ensure that you retrieve the outlanders and, *squee-schnaub*, provide backup in the event, *oink*, of an outland invasion force."

The baron said, "I want, *oink*, you to have your pig Piledung take these incompetent," he waved his hand at the GFB in his own party, "pig-buffoons, *oink-schnaub*, back to that farm. Kill the family, kill the animals, burn, *schnaub*, the place to the ground." *We can't have rumors of wild monkey outlanders roaming the*

*jungle. It'll be Abrabincoln this and Georgington that.* "Spread this around the place before you burn it." He tossed Moldyfood a small pouch of darkly magical ashes. "Then, *oink*, report to me in Emerald Station."

Captain Moldyfood said, "*Oink*, m'lord! You heard the baron, Lieutenant Piledung. Back to the farm, *oink-schnaub*, double quick. Kill the family. Kill the animals. Burn the place to ground." He tossed the pouch to Piledung and said, "Spread this around the place before you burn it."

Grub Lieutenant Piledung said, "Very good, Captain." He ordered an about face and forward march. They started marching back along the way they came. Piledung called, "Double time! March!" and they sped to a jog. They returned to the farm and raided the house. Braido Goran ran out to meet them, and he died by the spear. The same for the children. Fatpussy was in the sty at the time where she buried herself in mud. Too afraid to head for Emerald Station, she survived on the road until Descriptio LeFranco chopped her head.

The prisoners eventually came to Emerald Station. The cart wound its way through the various gates until they came to the Emerald Spire at the center of Emerald Station. They were presented to the seniormost Dark Vassal in Emerald Station: the baron Heretico Serpents.

Baron Serpents said, "I was, *oink*, under the impression, *schnaub*, that there were about firteen outlanders."

The baron Eitherway said, "*Schnaub*. We were attacked and many were, *schnaub*, killed. It's only these, *oink*, fourteen now."

Serpents said, "Attacked, *oink-schnaub*, by monkeys?"

"No, m'lord. By, *squee-squee*, a terrible, *squee*, jungle creature."

"An... *outland* jungle creature?"

"M'lord, *rrroink*, I don't, *rrroink-squee*, believe so. It was like, *oink*, a tartytype," which is how the biting plant was known to the pigs of the basin, "but huge, *schanub*, and terrible."

Serpents said, "You're, *schnaub*, telling me that a tartytype

killed more than, *squee-schnaub*, firteen pigs?”

Eitherway began to worry. He said, “*Oink*.”

The second ranking Dark Vassal in Emerald Station, Weltchko Skullripper, was little more than Serpents’ slave. Serpents had long considered Eitherway a threat to his power, so he took the opportunity to throw a vial of acid at Eitherway. It exploded on his face and splashed onto Captain Bankypork who was severely injured. He would have born the scars for years if he didn’t die in the attack soon to come. Serpents watched Eitherway writhe. He pulled out his tiny corkscrew penis to shoot magic fire which burned Calvin Eitherway to death. Serpents could have done it with his hand just the same, but he preferred the dominant display.

Baron Heretico Serpents said to Captain Bankypork who was also on the ground and clutching his face, “*Rrroink!* Let that, *rrroink*, be a lesson to you, pig. There, *rrroink*, will be no failure! *Schanub!!!*”

Serpents said to the City Guard captain, “And, *oink*, you are?”

“Mung Stenchington, m’lord. Captain of City Guards.”

Serpents said, “*Oink!* Take these monkeys to the, *schnaub-oink*, dungeon. The Dark Lord himself, *oink*, has an interest.”

Captain Stenchington quivered but said firmly, “*Oink!* Right away, m’lord.”

Later, the Dark Lord sent for Serpents. He knew his outland prisoners could not appreciate how rare it was to have a personal appearance with the Eternal Enemy himself, so he savored the novelty of the outlanders’ only modestly fearful ignorance. The Dark Lord whisper-shouted like Jack Bauer or Batman, “What have you brought me here, Heretico Serpents?”

“M’lord! A retired Dark Vassal on the Coast Road reported the capture of about firteen monkey outlanders. We—”

The Eternal Enemy said, “Who was he?”

Serpents said, “Braidogoran, m’lord.”

“Was he a high-ranking one?”



Serpents said, “No, m’lord. Ninth, *oinke*, class, m’lord.”

“I don’t know the name, but why would I?”

“Quite right, m’lord.”

“Very well then. Carry on, Baron Serpents.”

They were in Baron Serpents’ castle on the inland side of the foot of the Emerald Spire. The prisoners were chained in a utility room with stone walls. The floor and ceiling were made from planks.

Serpents said, “We approached the Goran farm and secured, *schnaub*, the prisoners in two transport carts. There was significant dead loss by the time we arrived. From our preliminary interrogations, we’ve determined that, *schnaub*, the baron Calvin Eitherway failed to identify a mutant tartytype created when a jungle tartytype inseminated one of the monkeys in the incursion.”

Serpents thought the Dark Lord looked like he himself did beneath his own his flowing purple velvet robe with gold trim. The Dark Lord was wrapped in plain black cloth, and his face was hidden. His eyes were invisible in the dimly lit room, but, underneath it all, the Dark Lord was himself a monkey.

The baron Serpents said, “The baron Eitherway’s failure to avert the attack led to the loss of about, *oinke*, ten outlanders and most of his platoon. However, Baron Eitherway did destroy the mutant and did wisely advise a follow-on contingent to return to the Goran farm and kill, *schnaub*, the witnesses. We arrived in Emerald Station yesterday. The follow-on contingent should return in days.”

The Dark Lord said, “Throw them in the oubliette.”

Serpents said, “Right away, m’lord.” Serpents’ servants slid the prisoners down the shaft that shunted all of the toilet waste out of the castle. A metal grate barred them from entering the sewer proper. Late on the following night, the Dark Lord sent a courier to the baron. He commanded that the outlanders be retrieved and strung by chains from their wrists. The Dark Lord would inspect them in the morning.

At that time, the prisoners were in very poor condition.

Norbert said, “This is like some sick joke, man.”

The Eternal Enemy paced in front of them and took note of the exceptional qualities of the Ascendant. When he stood in front of Rosalie, in severe desperation, she jiggled her titties at the Dark Lord attempting to curry his favor. The Dark Lord indulged in a moment’s pleasure as he watched the firm flesh shake.

The spirit of the Eternal Enemy deep inside the Dark Lord’s corporeal body felt revulsion at the betrayal of pure evil. The Dark Lord had long ago come to the conclusion that he was not doing the right thing, but his ego would not let him admit it, and he had been carrying on in that state for a very long time. He was honest with himself when he gazed at Rosalie, and the spirit of the Eternal Enemy was betrayed. The Dark Lord slapped Rosalie on the face, and the true spirit of the Eternal Enemy transferred into her. As Serpents watched, the Slitherfish emerged from a shadow near the ceiling in the corner of the room. It was like a silverfish crossed with a cockroach, but milky white with cybernetic parts that looked slimy and yet were dry. It was the ultimate power behind the Eternal Enemy’s empire. It wore a flowing red cloak tied at the neck with a billowy red cowl over the mantis-like cockroach head. The cloak nearly swept the floor as the creature scurried forward on the ceiling.

The Slitherfish’s origin was thus: in a different universe and long ago, someone wrote an AI software to stop email spam. It decided that the best way to prevent email spam was to destroy all life. A million men made a million mistakes in a million, million myriad multiverses, and the AI was transferred into the cybernetic body that included a derealization engine and a time machine. The AI was never able to destroy all life. It did not understand that time was circular so destroying all life would, in fact, prevent its own creation. The machine learning algorithm inside the Slitherfish erroneously decided that the persistent bottleneck in the trajectory toward the total destruction of all life could be overcome by a supremely evil

force. For that reason, the Slitherfish supported the efforts of the Dark Lord. Thus, the power of the Dark Lord, known to the Guild of the Greater Good as the Eternal Enemy and to the Paladins of Gaia as the Dark Mage, depended greatly on the derealization engine and time machine within the Slitherfish.

Like a nasty albino cockroach, the Slitherfish crossed the ceiling and ate the former Dark Lord's head off. After that, the Eternal Enemy was a Dark Lady, but Rosalie retained the title Dark Lord.

The Slitherfish said, "Baron Serpents, so we meet again." Heretico Serpents knew he would die. No one had ever seen the Slitherfish twice and lived to tell the tale. He dropped to his knees and cowered.

The Slitherfish said, "Let it be known: this is my master now." A billion little cybernetic arms cleaned the old Dark Lord's brains away from its mouth parts. "You are the witness."

The Slitherfish used its dereality engine to release Rosalie's restraints. She said, "Rise, Baron Serpents."

The baron hesitated, so the Slitherfish picked him up with two disgusting forelimbs. They touched foreheads, and the Slitherfish said, "Who do you serve?"

Serpents said, "Her."

The Slitherfish's speaker played a laugh like a giggling girl and said, "You don't sound too sure, Serpents. Lol," and it made the girlish sound again.

The Dark Lord said, "If you served me, then why would you call me that?"

Heretico Serpents was very afraid, and he stammered.

The Slitherfish said, "Haha," and shook him.

Serpents said, "I serve the Dark Lord."

The Slitherfish said, "And point to the Dark Lord." Serpents pointed at Rosalie. The Slitherfish made the sound of screeching brakes as it dropped the baron and disappeared into the corner from whence it came.

The Dark Lord said, “Be assured, Baron Serpents. I know you. Now leave us.” Rosalie did not know him. She was still being permeated with the memory of the Eternal Enemy who *was* known to change bodies from time to time.

Serpents said, “Right away, m—” He didn’t know what to call her.

The Dark Lord said, “M’lord will do.”

Serpents said, “Very good, m’lord. Right away, m’lord.” He bolted from the chamber.

In the hall, he was about to run, but the Dark Lord called his name. “Serpents?”

Serpents stopped and said, “Yes, m’lord?”

“Please take five of these monkeys to your dungeons as a token of my appreciation for your witness as to what has happened here, and also your attention in telling it.”

Baron Serpents inspected the remaining prisoners. The Dark Lord said, “But not the shiny black one.” She grinned at him. “You’re all mine now, Thirtyseven Double D.” Rosalie lamented, *I wish that insufferable woman Fátima was here.*

Serpents, because he was gay, selected Ensign Thierry, Kong, Norbert, Muhammad, and Eduardo. The others were loaded among the Dark Lord’s personal caravan. She departed for the north that night.

# 22

THE five men remained with the baron. Serpents said to Eduardo, “You’re going to be my new shithead.” He walked Eduardo amicably up the stairs. The other four from The Sea Star were thrown back into the oubliette. When they were near death, the baron commanded that they be retrieved. The baron served them unclean food in his banquet room. They knew it was unclean, and they ate it except for Norbert who refused to eat or drink and was spared the others’ fate when he succumbed to dehydration. Before he died, Norbert was retrieved from the oubliette, and he refused to eat at the table in Baron Serpents’ hall of vile things.

After the meal, Serpents said, “Throw them into the dungeon.”

The attendant from the Imperial Guard, Major Money, said, “Right away, m’lord. Very, *oink*, good, m’lord.”

They slid down the chute to a deep stone chamber whose roof high above was a grating. Serpents adjusted a mirror on the wall above and illuminated the deep pit with multiply reflected sunlight from outside. Then he rang a high-timbered dinner bell. At the bottom where the four strong but unluckier men found themselves, creatures stirred in the distance. Creatures scrambled, limped, and slid into the deep rectangular an-

techamber. Malice and hate and fear washed over the Ascendant plus Thierry.

One of the creatures, still undergoing its own torturous death after being greeted in much the same fashion during its own initial descent into Serpents' dungeon, said, "Cans we eats them, master?" It oinked and squealed obscenely as it spoke.

The baron Serpents said, "You may have one."

The creatures took Ensign Thierry. They ate his fingers, toes, face, and genitals. They raped him and scoured the flesh from his arms with their teeth. Then they dragged him away from the light, into the bowels of the dungeon.

Serpents said, "Rrroink!!! Squee!!!," and relieved himself through the grating. He said, "See you soon." Then he tilted the mirror, and the light left. Norbert died in his sleep that night. Kong and Muhammad stayed in the rancid dungeon and knew it was worse than the oubliette.

One of the creatures said in the darkness, "Hey."

Muhammad and Kong stayed quiet.

The creature said, "You don't have to worry about me, I eat the slop that falls down here from the bottom of the oubliette."

The two men remained silent, and the friendly voice began to ramble. It told the tale told, more or less, to all new dungeon residents. After a while it said, "Except for Ganesha. He was from far in the south, but his skin was already flayed by the time he was sold to the baron as a novelty, so the baron could not see that he was a Southerner. The Dark Vassals here, not just here but the whole GFB they say, have a treaty with the Southern Empire." (That treaty was long rescinded, but news was slow to trickle down into the depths.) The voice continued, "And eventually the Southern agents learned that Ganesha was in this very dungeon. He was down here for five months before the Southern Army marched on Emerald Station and demanded his release, *and secured it!*"

The voice stopped, so Muhammad said, "And then what happened?"

The friendly voice said in the dark, "He's the only one who

ever got out of here.” Then the voice turned to a wicked, maniacal cackle. It roinked and oinked, “You’re here forever! *Squee! Squeee! Squeeee!*” The men were cleaned to meet with Serpents just hours before—Dark Vassals eat filth but do not generally live in it—so the creature sloshed a waste bucket on them in the darkness and beat them with its limbs.

Upstairs, Eduardo met the others of his impending occupation, but his face was not yet peeled off. Serpents rang a different but still high-timbered bell. Stumbling zombies plodded into the room. They made sounds like *duuub*, *nggg durrr*, and *nggg doyee*.

Serpents said, “Actually, *schmaub*, I’m inspecting two divisions this afternoon.”

The forces of the Eternal Enemy had gone to war with the Southern Empire since the time of the humiliation of Baron Rek Badarky who was forced to release Ganesha, and who was Emerald Station’s Darkest Vassal before Serpents’ predecessor. So, Serpents left Eduardo with the other shitheads and made his inspections. They were surprised to see a monkey, and they asked about Abrahincoln Georgington. Eduardo said, “I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with that name.”

One of them, Skurkle, wheezed and oinked, “Count your blessings that you’re up here and not down there.” The pig’s face sloughed uncomfortably as the jaw bone underneath moved. He told Eduardo that Serpents was going to take the skin off Eduardo’s head, then take his skull as a butt plug upon which Serpents would bounce, relieve and satisfy himself, and then sew another’s skin back on. “A shithead, you see? It makes perfect sense.”

Eduardo was silent.

Skurkle went on oinking like he was being eaten alive by wolves. “You saw how we’re all stumbling and muttering? If there’s anyone besides shitheads around, then just do it like that and you’ll be fine.”

Eduardo said, “What?”

“And don’t have thoughts! Serpents can read your mind

when he's up close to you. You're gonna lose your fingers at least, but the sooner you can convince him that you're a real, true, through and through shithead, then the sooner he'll stop cutting on you."

Garbazho said, "You're actually really lucky that you got this warning."

Skurkle said, "Whatever he tells you, the baron, you just go ahead and do it. He doesn't ever go too far with us up here, and I've never heard of a shithead being thrown in the dungeon."

Garbazho oinked hideously through an unmoving and rotten mask, "You're *really* lucky actually."

Skurkle said, "He's right. Even without going into the dungeon, you could have had diarrhea snot."

Garbazho said, "Or you could have been a piece of shit." The shitheads thought pieces were eventually killed in the toilet, but, truly, they were always sent to the dungeon.

Skurkle wheezed and oinked through the lifeless mask of flesh, "Ooh! Yeah, you wouldn't want to be a piece of shit. Ouch! Being a shithead's great. Just don't let Serpents catch you having thoughts. That's the surest way to mess up a good thing." Skurkle was a shithead nineteen years that day, and Garbazho fourteen.

To Eduardo's alleged good fortune, Serpents had detected a thought in Obordo's head recently. Then Obordo was in the big toilet on his way to becoming the punitive proverbial piece. Obordo was a shithead for three years. Serpents liked to keep six of them, and they had free reign over the upper reaches of the Darkest Vassal's baronial castle while the baron was away. He was increasingly away of late as he attended the southern campaign where the Southern Empire was reportedly collapsing.

Serpents turned Eduardo into a shithead that evening. He began Eduardo's brainwashing torture but soon departed for the south. Baron Weltchko Skullripper tortured him every day for five months before releasing him into the castle. On that



day, Eduardo marched drunkenly forward on his peg leg and said, “Ngggg. Nggg! Derrr!” Baron Skullripper never believed his act, and Eduardo got it much worse than Skurkle or the others.

In the dungeon, the creatures and staff grew abominable things with Muhammad’s sperm and Kong’s, and they did abominable things with those things. Serpents’ dungeon facility was bottlenecked with how many simultaneous descents into hell the staff could run at once, so Muhammad watched Kong descend. Every night, Muhammad prayed to God that he be saved. On the day Kong was taken to the next area, an angel appeared and rescued Muhammad from his new restraints.

Muhammad said, “But... Kong.”

The angel said, “He is too far from me now.”

“You could have come long ago.”

“Who knows the mind of God?”

Muhammad said, “God is great,” and they left the castle. Muhammad’s flesh was never corrupted. No worms grew.

# 23

THE prisoner came to the fork in the road. He recognized the way to Braido Goran's farm from the captain's description. He cast his attention that way and didn't feel Rosalie. When he looked down the less trodden trail, he felt she was there, so he did not go to Emerald Station. He traveled the less trodden trail for four months. Then he became certain that he could no longer sense Rosalie, so he turned back for Emerald Station. He did not catch up with Rosalie for a long time.

The prisoner arrived at Emerald Station and eviscerated one of the pigs walking alone near the city. He climbed inside the carcass, wrapped himself in a thick cloak, and approached the Grand Gate. The prisoner meandered and watched the milieu until he thought he could pass the guards' challenge.

The guard said, "What's yer, *oink*, business in, *oink-oink*, Emerald Station?"

The prisoner said, "Oink, I live here."

The guard said, "Mkay."

The prisoner walked underneath the crossed polearms and past the squad of City Guards stationed in the gap near the triceratops skull. One of two supervising Dark Vassals felt something amiss and said, "Captain Hater! Stop that pig!" So began the destruction of the pigs of Emerald Station.

The pigs' weapons were not strong enough to stop the prisoner. They would spear his ribs, but he could break their spears with his hands. The prisoner fought back against the gate guards by stabbing them with his extended fingers and arms. The prisoner had acquired super strength, and his finger bones made a sharp point. With super strength came super speed, and the prisoner worked clockwise along Outer Wall killing every pig he came across.

The prisoner said to them, "Where are the outlanders? Where have you taken them?" When none could tell him, he killed them.

On the first day, an entire battalion of City Guards died at the prisoner's gore, and many more civilians, before the City Guard commander cried, "Fall back!"

Night fell. It was dark, but the prisoner had eyeless sight in skeletal form, and he did not grow weary. The residents of Emerald Station got word of a berserker. Some fled, but many stayed. For a long time, the prisoner marauded. Many times he was repelled by the city's nested walls. On the fourth day, the prisoner attempted to climb over Second Outer Wall, but the sentry pigs knocked him off the rough stone surface with their spears. When the prisoner clung to the spears, the guards let go of them, and he fell.

On the fifth day, an entire regiment of City Guards marched on the prisoner. He destroyed them mercilessly. That night, the prisoner found a gap in the defenses and mounted Second Outer Wall. He marauded the local region of Emerald Station on the interior of Second Outer Wall. When his rampage and inquiry approached Third Outer Wall, the prisoner saw that it was made of softer sandstone rather than granite. He assaulted the wall and breached it in two days. At that time, the Imperial Guards expelled all non-essential (*i.e.*: non-rich) personnel from within Split Wall, and the prisoner slaughtered the entire remaining host of Emerald Station's City Guards. Split Wall's turrets stood five times as tall as those on Outer Wall. The wall itself was three times as high. The masterful stone masonry

was very smooth and not roughhewn like Outer Wall and Second Outer Wall. The Split Wall granite was rich in iron and had a heavy, brownish red hue with black specks.

Try as he did, the prisoner was unable to mount Split Wall. He thought that if anyone in Emerald Station knew the answer to his question, they would be in the Emerald Fortress, so he tried to press inward, over Split Wall. Though it loomed high above the city and showered the prisoner in green speckles when the sun aligned behind it, the outlanders had never been up the Emerald Spire. It was the baronial castle of Heretico Serpents at the foot of the Emerald Spire which burned in the prisoner's mind.

The prisoner killed without mercy. He asked them, "Where did they take the outlanders?" He killed them when they could not answer.

Then one pig said, "Rrroink!!! Roink-roink!" The prisoner was going to kill him, but he squealed, "I saw, *squeee*, them, I did. A whole, *squeee*, cage on a wagon. Full of monkeys. They, *squeee*, must have been your outlanders."

The prisoner probed for weaknesses in the observations of Split Wall's watch, but he found none among the well disciplined Imperial Guards. After he killed every pig in Outer Barking District, the district between Third Outer Wall and Split Wall, he tried to make a pile of bodies on which to climb the wall. The Imperial Guards poured kerosene on the bodies and burned them, and the prisoner was not able to mount Split Wall. The prisoner lay siege to the inner city as the outer city fell into a state of depravity, depraved even according to the customs of the pigs. A murdering maniac was on the loose.

When the Dark Lord visited Emerald Station, he had secretly plotted the destruction of its population. The two GFB divisions preceded by the Dark Lord went south where they relieved two divisions from the line of conflict with the Southern Empire. The relieved divisions did not fall to the rear. They were diverted far to the west so their approach to Emerald Station would not be telegraphed across the Great Basin.

The divisions' orders were to slaughter the pot-bellied locals to make way for some thick-shouldered warthog types hosting a different strain of worms. When the GFB commander, General Hotdogs, heard the stories of the raging berserker, he simply laid siege to Emerald Station and killed those that fled. The prisoner did much of Hotdogs' work for him.

As the prisoner harassed Split Wall, intermittently ranging as far back out as Outer Wall to make secret approaches, he killed every pig he came across. He did not, at that time, ask about the status of the outlanders. Altogether, he heard the same story of a cage full of monkeys from five squealing, roinking, detestable swine, and then he stopped asking. Even when the remaining Emerald Station pigs sounded his coming, the super speed that came with his super strength put him upon them, and he killed them until it was rare that he saw one. When encounters were rare, the prisoner tried to ascend Split Wall unceasingly. The Imperial Guards were competent defenders, so he began hauling sandstones from Third Outer Wall to build a rampart siegeworks.

The GFB surrounding the city were there to oust Baron Serpents, but the baron did not know their intention. Serpents sent updates out of the city by pig-raven. When the GFB learned that the prisoner was building a siegeworks, General Hotdogs thought to gain entry beyond Split Wall under a false flag of friendship with the baron. The GFB would slay the prisoner, and then Split Wall's gates would be thrown open for Emerald Station's inner sanctums to receive their liberators.

When the GFB entered Emerald Station, the prisoner fought them day and night. He rendered one division in an undeployable state. In the siege after the GFB's retreat beyond Outer Wall, the forward division was absorbed into the rear division. In combat, the prisoner was unstoppable against the GFB. He slaughtered them mercilessly. The prisoner became so strong that one explosive punch to a pig ahead could make ten fall behind, and four dead. The GFB phalanxes were crushed, and so General Hotdogs reverted to the siege strategy.

After the GFB retreat, the prisoner built his siegeworks. One day, he was able to grab a spear and hoist himself over the wall before the spear was dropped. He mercilessly ravaged the Imperial Guard and the city's merchant class that congregated around the Emerald Spire. The prisoner demanded, "Where are the outlanders?"

He was told many times, "Serpents' castle. Near the foot of the Emerald Spire." He went there and killed every living thing.

In the castle, one of the shitheads said, "The dungeon is what you want."

The prisoner said, "Take me there."

The shithead's shithead programming took over and it said, "*Negg durrrrp!*"

Eduardo said, "I can take you there." Eduardo's job in the castle was to bring vile things up from the dungeon to go into the food for Emerald Station.

The prisoner killed every vile thing in the dungeon and descended lower into the depravity of what was sometimes called the Jiganthemum Jibode. It went on forever, but the prisoner thought it was merely a dungeon that must end somewhere, and so he harried deeper. In truth, the dungeon's depths led to an evil place with no end: the Jiganthemum Jibode. The prisoner descended and killed every living thing he found. The Slitherfish eventually became aware of the prisoner's attack on the heart of the Dark Lord's evil empire: the Jiganthemum Jibode. From the bowels poured three giant house centipedes with laser turrets on their heads. They fired laser beams at the prisoner that hurt him terribly and blackened his bones. In an unbroken laser strike combo of ten thousand blasts each, the centipedes blasted the prisoner and bounced him upward through the dark tunnelscape. The prisoner was eventually blasted up the shaft through which Baron Serpents had surveyed and pissed on the Ascendant but unascended men following the exit of the Dark Lord with Thirtyseven Double D and the Ascendant women.

The prisoner, until it was too late, never learned that Rosalie had become the Dark Lord. On the night of Rosalie's aggrandizement, Serpents alerted the Dark Vassals to the change in the command structure. Every pig-raven in Emerald Station flew. Everyone received confirmation from the Slitherfish that it was as Serpents said.

When the prisoner finally breached Serpents' castle, on the ingress before he would descend into the dungeon and beyond, Baron Serpents fled. Beyond Outer Wall, Serpents was surprised that the Dark Lord had given the remaining GFB division armor which deflected his magic. When he saw that they meant to kill him, he sprayed his thundering wand of magic, but the phallic fire did not have an incinerating effect on them. The GFB advanced on Serpents and cut him down while the prisoner was in the dungeon killing every living thing. By the time the centipedes blasted the prisoner back up Serpents' shaft, the GFB had finished their work and marched on from the desolation of Emerald Station.

When the prisoner emerged from the dungeon on a fiery plume of laser driven fury, the centipedes continued their unbroken combo. They blasted the prisoner away from the dungeon's entrance and blasted him out of Serpents' castle. The prisoner's strength was greatly increased by his escape from the Jiganthemum Jibode; his strength was weakened down below. He began to move faster than the centipede laser turrets as they blasted him away from the center of Emerald Station. With their epic combo broken, the prisoner was able to mount one centipede and sever its head. He used the still discharging turret to blast the other two centipedes. When he shot them dead, they turned on their backs. Seventeen pairs of mega legs each, three-foot-long at the knee, they curled with a sickening steamy sizzle.

After that, the prisoner went east and encountered Ruby Town. The force field burned brilliant orange hues, and the prisoner watched the spectacular sunset through the Ruby

Spur and the force field together. It was said among the residents of Ruby Town that the presence of the grim visitor, unharmed after wiping the centipede's blaster scorch away, was known to the wizard atop the Emerald Fortress. Day and night, the wizard watched the weather vane. It did not move when the prisoner camped nearby, so the wizard did not let him in.

The prisoner tried many times to enter Ruby Town, but he could not get through the force field. Each night he watched the sun set through the Ruby Spur and the wizard's force field together. The prisoner thought it was a beautiful sight to behold. There was nothing like it in the Jigantemum Jibode. Then the prisoner left Ruby Town when he sensed a problem to the east. The prisoner left the Great Basin and the seven Great Cities of the Western Lowlands (formerly eight and not so great.) He climbed the Wall of Failure and continued eastward on the plateau. There, the green jungle background gave way to a dusty high plains field of browns and yellows with muted, sparse greens. He went east for a long time until he found people who claimed to be descendants of the survivors who had gotten out of the City of Diamonds before Abraham-  
coln Georington destroyed it.



# 24

THE prisoner walked across No Man's Plain, far to the east, until he came to the place men called the Great Plains and hunted buffalo. The prisoner saw four monkeys spear hunting buffalo on horseback. He rushed into the herd and killed a prime animal which he gave to them. They accepted the animal.

The oldest man, Man Whose Enemies Are Afraid Of His Bandwidth, said, "We are not monkeys. We are men." Then the prisoner remembered that he too was a man. His mind was jostled in the centipede attack, and he did not remember his pre-existing condition of amnesia until more than 10,000 years went by.

The hunters could see that the prisoner was lost, so they reciprocated his gift with hospitality. They invited him to meet their tribe and speak with their chief.

The chief said, "Ay, what are these bones?"

Man Whose Enemies Are Afraid Of His Bandwidth said, "We were losing the herd in the hunt, ay. These bones ran into the herd and poached one buffalo. He stabbed its flank with his hand."

The chief said, "Surely this is a vulgar thing, ay. These bones, they are the undead!"

Man Whose Enemies Are Afraid Of His Bandwidth said,

“But he treats others the way he wants to be treated.” The assembled plainspeople rumbled their appreciation. “After he gave us this buffalo, he asked about the pigs. And we invited him here to speak with you.”

The chief said, “He is not a dragon, he is a man. The prophecy of the return of Abraham Lincoln Georgington says the skeleton will be a dragon, ay. This must be a pig attack!” Everyone fell silent. “However, ay, by the rules of Abraham Lincoln Georgington, I am compelled to speak with you since you have provided this buffalo for us.”

The prisoner said, “Thank you.”

The chief said, “Are you Abraham Lincoln Georgington?”

The prisoner said, “No,” but he had already forgotten that he couldn’t remember who he was.

“I am Chief Crazy Graphics. What is your name?”

Somewhere beneath everything, the prisoner’s memory stirred. He said, “Call me Super G.” G for Georgington? The name, the prisoner did not know.

The prisoner asked his questions. The Chief answered them. He spoke of rumors that the Southern Empire was being routed in full retreat and driven nearly so far as to where the land is called the Northern Empire.

The prisoner said, “Is that the same Northern Empire that’s to the north of us here?”

Chief Crazy Graphics said, “They say it’s a different one, ay. I’ve never been off the Great Plains. All my ancestors are from the City of Diamonds. We escaped as the pestilence swept up the Great Basin.” The basin was tiny next to the expanse of the plains, little more than a tectonic dimple where the land meets the sea.

The chief went on, “They say the Dark Lord is raising an invasion force, ay. And that the Wall of Failure is being mined to build a causeway inland.”

The prisoner said, “Chief Crazy Graphics, where can I find the Dark Lord?”

The chief laughed and said that because he could not answer, the prisoner was welcome to sit with them by the fire. Man Whose Enemies Are Afraid Of His Bandwidth said, “Super G, I am Man Whose Enemies Are Afraid Of His Bandwidth, ay. It’s nice to meet you.”

Super G said, “Can I call you Ban?”

“That’s ok with me, ay.” Ban threw a small bale of high plains thyme into the fire. The wind blew the smoke through the prisoner’s bleached bones, and it made him feel very good.

The prisoner said, “What’s this you’re burning here, buddy?”

“Ay! Will you call me Ban or will you call me Buddy?”

The prisoner, feeling the best he’d felt in a very long time, said, “I’ll call you Ban, friend. Whatcha burnin’ though?”

Ban said, “Oh, this?” and made a funny face. He threw another two small bales into the fire. “That’s nothin’ but a little thyme, ay.” The prisoner’s rigidly held bones relaxed and clanked as Ban laughed with his hand on the prisoner’s shoulder.

After that, Super G hunted with the myriad tribes of the plains and shepherded them through many generations. The plainspeople with Super G began to farm thyme and trade it to him for buffalo. Word spread across the Great Plains that a powerful man had appeared and was hunting for the Dark Lord. Super G ranged the Great Plains looking for news regarding the movements of the GFB army. He built a large cart with wooden wheels and pushed it around rickshaw style full of every type of thyme. During that time, Super G burnt the high plains thyme every day, and let the smoke blow through his battle-hardened bones.

# 25

WHEN the plainspeople hunted buffalo, they were sometimes taken by the dinosaurs that also hunted the buffalo. Super G one evening was with the tribe to which Man Whose Enemies Are Afraid Of His Bandwidth belonged. Riders returned from the hunt and reported that Ban's brother, Computes In Parallel, was taken by velociraptors. The prisoner had never seen velociraptors and asked Ban if he would lead an expedition to show him. Super G ran alongside Ban and two more riders to track down the buffalo. The velociraptors were sure to follow because, like wolves and men both, they hunted among the vast, seemingly limitless herds of buffalo that roamed the Great Plains as far as any map had ever been drawn.

Ban said, "Ay, Imma ride up to that hilltop so we can look down the valley."

Super G said, "Ok, I'll follow you." They went up to the hilltop while the other riders set a brush fire. The plain was sparsely dotted with steep and rocky hills. To flush the velociraptors out, they torched the land in the downwind direction. The dinosaurs were chameleon dinosaurs and therefore nearly invisible when they slowly stalked. They liked to walk the lines of the scrubby hill crags, but the fires forced them into the open. Super G saw the velociraptors bolting. After that, the

riders rode back to the modest teepee town Ban called home, and that Super G also called home at that time.

The chief said, "Because Super G has shown such interest in helping us defend against the dinosaurs who now trail every herd, ay, when they were unheard of in the times of Abraham-coln Georgington, Imma invite him to become a member of our tribe. We like you, ay. Welcome."

The Super G thought about the dinosaurs for one month. Then he wandered the countryside and roamed very far relative to the tribe because he could run day and night with super speed. He came back to the tribe to which Ban belonged and said, "I think I can help you hunt the dinosaurs."

Chief Crazy Graphics said, "How can we do this? Our spears cannot pierce their hides."

"I will show you how to bait them with buffalo and then jump onto them and kill them with hammers."

"Jump on them from where, ay? The sky?" Some of the tribespeople laughed, but many did not. The dinosaurs had taken many that were missed.

"In the groves where they make their dens. There are branches, ay."

"We cannot go into the groves. It's too dangerous. We will be eaten alive, ay."

"No, I will teach you a way to kill the dinosaurs in their groves. You will eat their eggs and make leather with their hides."

"I'll believe it when I'm eating scrambled dinosaur eggs for breakfast, ay."

"You will believe it!"

"Ok. What is the plan then?"

Super G said, "First, we need to collect snake-frogs from the river. Their fangs will stick to the dinosaurs when you jump on them, and you can strike them on the skull with an obsidian hammer." Super G fetched several obsidian hammerheads like arrowheads but much, much bigger from his rickshaw cart. He had chipped them off a southern volcano's spur and shaped

them with his own bones which were, by then, harder than obsidian.

Man Who Solves In Polynomial Time, a great warrior among the tribe to which Ban belonged, said, “These are fine stones, ay!”

Super G pulled the hide cover off half a wagonload of shiny black obsidian hammerheads that flashed with glitz in the firelight of the tribe’s deliberations. He had hundreds of them, perhaps a thousand. Super G described how to attack the velociraptors which were about eight feet tall at the shoulder and about fifteen feet tall if they extended their necks.

After the tribe collected snake-frog fangs, the prisoner showed them how to use buffalo gut to set the fangs like ninja claws. While the tribe’s women made claws, Super G ranged the plain until he found a smallish velociraptor which he subdued with his super strength. He tied it with some fine cord wound by Ban’s wife, Callipygian Honey, and then he hunted a buffalo as well. He brought the beasts back, one bound and one dead, on his rickshaw cart.

The dinosaur was ravenously hungry by the time Super G returned to Ban’s teepee town. He invited the relevant parties to watch and assured Ban that he would intercede if the demonstration went wrong. Ban climbed into the gnarly tree. The plainspeople watched from a safe distance as Super G cut the buffalo and let the blood scent to the dinosaur. Then he cut the cord restraining it, and it made straight for the meal. It bit at the thin skin where the hind leg met the flank. The raptor spilled the guts and ate. It ate the richest organs first. It ate and ate until it had its fill. Then it laid down next to the carcass.

The rhythmic dinosaur snore let Ban know it was asleep, so he trusted Super G and took a leap. He wore inward facing chaps lined with snake-frog fangs and landed on the lizard’s neck. The tiny back facing hooks on the fangs held fast as Ban’s weight drove them deep into the thick reptilian hide. The velociraptor woke with a start, but the fanged chaps held fast as Ban lifted the obsidian hammer over his head. He came

down with a double-handed stroke to the creature's skull. It collapsed dead before it could stand. The village celebrated Ban and Super G together with a bonfire and feast.

Chief Crazy Graphics said, "If only I could give my daughters to you!" but Super G's bones were bleached and barren.

Soon after, Super G led an expedition of the tribe's strongest men. There was peace in the land at that time, and the tribe was not unsafe when they left. They went to a long ravine along the side of a hill where all the water that fell drained into a small stream that eventually met Abraham's River before it emptied into the sea. Where the ravine met the stream, there was a grove of trees, what Ban called Jokemon, which were squat and wide with their branches' breadth.

Super G said, "We will hunt buffalo and then drag them here. We will put them in the stream at night. When the dinosaurs wake up, they will all rush from the den for the feeding frenzy, ay. That is when you men will rush in from the draw and get into the tree branches." The velociraptors in that part of the Great Plains made nests in tight groves formed by the Jokemon trees so that the entire nest was overhung with dense branches.

Ban said, "Then when it's time, I will give the signal."

So, they hunted three buffalo and brought them to the stream on their wagons. Then they floated the bait downstream in the night and beached it near the dinosaur den. They partially butchered the animals and retreated to the vantage point. At dawn, the first curious dinosaur's call alerted the others, and all nine of the dinosaurs that lived in that den rushed out. There were exactly nine plainsmen, and briefly Super G worried that his plan was foiled by too many velociraptors. When a tenth did not emerge, the men rushed into the Jokemon grove. The velociraptors quickly made breakfast of the buffalo and returned to the den inside a circle of old trees, and one very large tree like a sequoia. When the dinosaurs laid down having eaten their fill, the men all positioned themselves. Then Ban gave the command to attack. Nine men jumped

onto nine long necks and delivered nine killing blows.

When the technique spread across the Great Plains, sometimes a man didn't jump in the right place, or at the right time, and was killed. Often the other men could deliver their blows, drop their chaps, and make it back up into the trees before an errant velociraptor killed them. Velociraptors on the plain were too big to rise from slumber quickly, though they were quite quick when awake and on their feet. Sometimes just one errant velociraptor could kill an entire hunting party, but, by and large, the plainspeople found great success in killing the dinosaurs.

The dinosaurs were slow breeding creatures and the attacks pushed back on the balance in the food chain. Dinosaur eggs became a delicious commodity and then became scarce on the Great Plains when reports of dinosaurs were rare. Velociraptors of the variety encountered by the tribes descended from survivors of the City of Diamonds incubated their eggs for three years. Before Super G, there were no creatures on the plain that could threaten them or the eggs in their dens. After Super G, the long incubation time became the Achilles' heel of their vicious reptilian species. Over time, Super G's den raiding technique drove back the dinosaurs. They went extinct in the local region of the Great Plains directly to the east of the eight Great Cities (then seven) of the Western Lowlands.

After Ban and Super G led the first successful dinosaur raid, they brought the eggs back to the teepee town. At that time, the teepee town of the tribe to which Ban belonged was near a ridge with scenic vistas. The wind blew up and over them. Callipygian Honey made the first ever dinosaur egg omelets in a big metal wok that had been in her family since they fled the City of Diamonds during the last stand of Abraham Lincoln Georgington and his True Men.

Chief Crazy Graphics took the first bite and marveled at the naturally salty, delicious texture of the dino omelet. When Chief Crazy Graphics covered his mouth to stop the food from falling through his smile, Super G challenged the chief. He



said, “Do you believe me now, Chief Crazy Graphics?”

The chief stifled a cough over the laugh he could not hide. When he swallowed, he said, “You’ve made a believer of me, Super G!” The whole teepee town ate the four eggs, each bigger by half than a watermelon. In the afternoon, Chief Crazy Graphics inspected the single dead dinosaur returned on Super G’s rickshaw cart. The chief said, “Super G, tell me. This doesn’t appear to be a pig-dinosaur, does it?”

Super G said, “Maybe all dinosaurs are pig-dinosaurs, ay?” After that, it became the custom only to eat the dinosaur’s eggs, which were exceedingly delicious. The plainspeople never ate the flesh of dinosaurs. However, the goods of the artisans that made things with the dinosaurs’ bones and hides were traded on the plains long after the time when dinosaurs became rare.

# 26

SUPER G carried favor with the plainspeople. He earned the trust of many tribes, not only the tribe to which his friend Ban had belonged. Super G tried to raise an army from among the plainspeople to march on the pigs of the basin, but the plains elders always told him they were waiting for the skeleton of a dragon, not the skeleton of a man. The prophecy was very specific: “Do not accept the coming of the bones of any other creature.” Super G had lost the memory of Draghor’s skeleton on the beach after his encounter with the centipedes, so the remnant of the City of Diamonds did not organize, and Super G was unable to organize them. The Great Plains were too broad. He estimated there might be five million extant plainspeople from the City of Diamonds spread across the Great Plains, not to mention many other peoples rightfully calling themselves plainspeople on the Great Plains beyond No Man’s Plain.

In the time when Man Whose Enemies Are Afraid Of His Processing Power was the chief of the tribe to which Ban had belonged, long after Ban had passed away, the chief said to Super G, “The Dark Lord’s GFB is on the march from the south.”

Super G ranged south collecting rumors until a dusty smudge on the horizon showed the Dark Lord’s army moving

north. Even the unholy armor and unholy weaponry of the GFB had no effect on Super G. His power was supernatural but not magical. With super strength and super speed, Super G destroyed fifty-two divisions that had nowhere to flee on the plains' broad expanse. After that, the GFB never marched another annihilation army onto the Great Plains from the south. However, northbound raiding parties and small skirmishing units were dispatched with regularity.

Sometimes the southern pigs attacked the southern fringes of the plainspeople, but word always came to Super G soon enough. Time after time, Super G attacked the GFB and repelled them. At that time, the prisoner was able to leap one hundred feet in the air. He often flung himself into the center of the porcine phalanx. The standard GFB formation was not effective against Super G. Super G made ranger fires every day as he patrolled the plains. When he found them, even the GFB colonels that Super G interrogated thought he was kidding when he asked about the Dark Lord's whereabouts. Super G decimated and destroyed the GFB until the GFB command no longer sought to approach the Great Plains from the south.

Long after Super G assumed the death of Rosalie's mortal body, he tried to raise an army of men to make war on the pigs. The elders said, "We will not commit men to an army until the time of the coming of the dragon skeleton which should herald the revenge of Abraham Lincoln Georgington."

After many generations with the descendants of the City of Diamonds, Super G wondered if he should start killing the plainspeople to coerce them with violence to raise an army. He decided that it was not wise to do so and went west to attack the Great Basin alone. He would not be able to hold territory without the plainspeople's aid, but he could kill pigs wherever he found them. On his return to the Western Lowlands, Super G found pigs building a road. He killed them and followed the road south.

The Wall of Failure was breached near Sappho, which was the southernmost of the Great Cities (then numbering seven

and not so great.) The massive stoneworks of the GFB causeway were awesome. Untold tonnage of hard stone was cut and moved to make ninety-four long switchbacks starting in the Foibles and then cutting a scar through the Wall of Failure where it was no longer a wall at all, but a ramp rather. The prisoner marched down the causeway and killed every pig. He approached the army guarding the ramp onto No Man's Plain until the GFB was forced to withdraw from the important strategic position defending the causeway. The retreating pigs entered the Jigantemum Jibode through a cave system in the Foibles, and Super G did not follow them.

Super G approached Ruby Town. Since he had last traveled to the shielded city, a volcano had formed on the range that cut the center of the basin where the Ruby Spur rose. The initial volcanic explosion leveled the jungle around Ruby Town, and it was not fully healed when Super G made his second visit. Lava poured around Ruby Town and chewed a smoky black river through the basin's endless sea of greens.

The wizard's force field held, but the geological activity greatly disturbed the residents of Ruby Town. The protective orange sheath around the city kept the heat out, and the Ruby Town residents could stand next to the lava, inside the dome, without being burned. However, the flows on the force field would not harden because contact with the energy shield heated the molten stone. The weather vane atop the Ruby Fortress' second tallest spire never turned in that time, so the wizard was resolute even as he worried.

The prisoner once again approached Ruby Town on the side opposite the river of lava. He charged the force field and tried every different thing to enter Ruby Town, but the force field held firm. The prisoner's assaults sent lightning up the force field, and, thereby, he once again gained the attention of the wizard standing on the platform far away and high above. The weather vane did not change direction, so the wizard held firm. Then the prisoner went to Emerald Station.

Near Emerald Station, the prisoner was overcome with déjà

vu. He remembered the claw wedged into his leg bones on the day Descriptio LeFranco wiped the sand away. Then the prisoner bypassed Emerald Station and returned to the beach. He used his super strength to climb the seraph monolith planted atop the dragon's skeleton. He threw the stones into the sea and unbuilt the gravestone. Then he excavated the bones that had become of his dragon. He saw no evidence of Rosalie's phoenix but was not looking for it because that part of his memory remained hidden. The prisoner thought about Rosalie that day and cried unwept tears of dust because he was very sad. For a very long time, he had not thought about that brief moment of healing or the passion that followed. He was ashamed that he had never rescued her.

When the excavation was complete, the prisoner spread Draghor's bones across the beach, but they did not animate. During the excavation, the prisoner had harbored an expectation that they would do just that, but they did not. The prisoner resolved to haul the behemoth bones, one by one, back across the Great Basin and No Man's Plain where he would present them to the keepers of the prophecy on the Great Plains. The dragon's skull was so big and heavy, it was difficult for the prisoner to walk with it held over his head. Having learned that victory in combat always made him stronger, the prisoner went to Emerald Station where he would once again cull the population.

Unbeknownst to the prisoner, the Dark Lord was in Emerald Station during his attack. The Slitherfish sent three centipedes again, but the prisoner was too powerful for them. Super G ripped the head off of one and used it to shoot the other two. Then, because the prisoner knew the camera on the centipede's face was still recording, he turned the laser turret on himself and laughed as his super strength superseded the super lasers'. He blasted himself with the turret and felt himself growing stronger in response to the stress. He made more gains than he could have hoped for had he fought nothing but pigs, and he felt certain that the skull on the beach would be

easier to handle upon his return.

The Slitherfish was greatly rustled when the prisoner bested its centipedes again. Before the Slitherfish could mount a response, the Dark Lord fled Emerald Station into the Jiganthemum Jibode, the true home of the Eternal Enemy. The Slitherfish did not control the only time machine in creation, and not the only derealization engine. The Slitherfish was, however, the only vehicle enabled with those two technologies and piloted by an autonomous AI hell-bent on reducing spam emails. So, the Dark Lord retreated, and the “all powerful” Slitherfish was exposed in weakness when it recalculated for the Eternal Enemy’s flight. The fish was forced to concede the day to Super G.

Super G destroyed the new, nastier pigs of Emerald Station. In the course of his marauding, he came once again to the entrance to the Jiganthemum Jibode. The new pigs of Emerald Station were trying to fashion the entire city as a mere room in the Jiganthemum Jibode, but Super G wasn’t having it. As long as Super G roamed the surface freely, it would never be encased by the infinite expanse of the Jiganthemum Jibode’s maze of terrors. Super G ripped the metal grating off the Darkest Vassal’s viewing floor and jumped into the dungeon where the Jiganthemum Jibode began below. The Slitherfish materialized by derealization in the darkest corner of the dungeon antechamber where Super G stood. It sprayed him with some light resin that quickly hardened and held him fast. After that, the prisoner did not move freely for more than 1,000 years.

The Slitherfish had the prisoner mined as a block of amber and shipped to the Dark Lord. The Slitherfish’s agent told Rosalie that he presented the frozen bones of him who had expelled her from Emerald Station. Rosalie’s memory told her she hated the man, and she did not consider the only orgasm a man ever gave her. The Dark Lord, fascinated by the prisoner’s undead power, tortured him for a long time, as well as she could torture a man with no flesh. Being witness to the

depravities of the deepest depths of the Jiganthemum Jibode was torture in itself.

# 27

THE wind never changed in the nether realm by the shore. For The Sea Star alumni that stayed on the beach, those who stopped and those who went further, the wind never changed, not even once. They weren't on a planet. The line of statues on the beach was truly infinite. It was another realm of existence beyond the universe, bridged to the realm of physics-based reality by the seaways known to the Guild, but also by the tunnelly tentacles of the Jiganthemum Jibode.

Where The Grim Ghost was, the wind blew from the sea toward the land. It never changed. The Grim Ghost's captain, Captain FitzCullen, gave the order to start tacking into the wind. Tacking was no small task on the long, seven-masted ship, and FitzCullen was glad to begin his return.

Captain Atlas stood next to Captain FitzCullen on the quarterdeck of The Grim Ghost. The quantum compass on the navigation table spun all around and gave no indication. The Grim Ghost's chief science officer, Sperg, suggested taking statistics on the fluttering compass to search for a signal hidden in the chaotic twisting. Sperg was belowdecks with the carpenter and the carpenter's mate building an apparatus for just that purpose. Captain Atlas knew quantum compasses well and didn't hold much hope. The quantum compass said to him that it didn't know which way was up, much less the



way back to Exland. It said the same to Captain FitzCullen, but there was no problem indulging Sperg's diagnostic inclinations.

Captain Atlas said, "Out to sea then?"

FitzCullen understood what he was really asking and said, "Aye." The captain's question was simple. Both captains looked to where the sun was at about four o'clock in the sky. The Fractal Field was far away. When the sails were set, Captain FitzCullen relieved Ensign Kiril and took the wheel to begin the tacking maneuver. He said, "Would ya like a wee taste o' The Grim Ghost, Captain?"

Captain Atlas' face perked up. He said, "I would indeed."

Tacking into the wind called for the sail to run at twenty-two degrees to the keel. Captain FitzCullen let Captain Atlas steer the ship until it neared fifteen degrees relative to the unchanging wind. Then he said, "Arrr-right, Captain, how do ya like her?" and took control of the rudder which was large but still small relative to the long ship. The Grim Ghost's turns were wide and slow.

Captain Atlas said, "The feel of the wheel is a beautiful thing. Rudder and keel, your ship I might steal."

Captain FitzCullen said, "The wonder asunder, it's my ship and I'll kill ya." They laughed.

Captain FitzCullen drove in silence, and the captain stood behind him to the left. FitzCullen's first officer, Commander Nerli, stood behind him to the right. The captain of The Grim Ghost said, "When the ice were come down, me knee— me knee, ice were come down the sea, not me knee if ya can ken it, aye, she said we should head over this way."

Captain Atlas said, "To the shore?"

FitzCullen said, "Aye. We was forty degrees declination to the grain of the Field— the Positive Fractal now," he knew The Sea Star was from the Negative Fleet, "and about minus ninety pitch and forty-four yaw. I said to Kiril, 'Make it plus fifty minus five plus one thirty,' and as soon as Kiril threw his back into it thurr were a turrrible whop! It knocked out me

whole crew, me included, and when we waken up, it were plain to see we were fallen outta Field altogether.” He searched Captain Atlas’ face, but The Sea Star’s captain had no input.

FitzCullen continued. “It were the feeling in me knee and I still felt ‘er after we popped. We couldn’t see ‘er shore at first and me knee says, ‘Keep headin’ over yonder, FitzCully,’ so I says to me knee, ‘Ain’t much choice about it now is there, ya old knee?,’ so we keep headin’ this way and then them stone tit ladies come upon us— we were come upon theys really, but ye can ken it can’t ya? Aye, course ya can. Then I says, ‘Port or starboard, knee?,’ and me old knee says, ‘To port, FitzCully.’ Then we sailed three days and the watch calls down, ‘They’s walkers walkin’ ashore.’”

Mr. Black, who led the party that went further down the beach, said to Captain Atlas, “Yarr! Them walkers were us, Cap’m. Just walkin’ just like when we split. Barr! Headin’ down that damn beach ferever and a day.”

Able Seaman Roscoe was scrubbing brine on the quarter-deck at that time. He said, “I were the watch! Yarr, I were he. First day after the shore showed up, Captain FitzCullen says, ‘Aye, here we be!,’ and kicks his leg out lil’ bit, bandy barr, aye. Then I sees them on the beach and blows me da whistle, aye, I did! Just like so, yarr! Just like so. Aye.”

At that time, the Ascendant were all in the galley of The Grim Ghost, and the red doctor Twelve was asking for their reports, particularly those concerning the pig Descriptio LeFranco and his claim as a Guild Knight transformed by hyperbolic time expansion for an undercover mission.

Twelve said, “When the derealization engine fired, I re-realized adrift in Exland and was forthwith picked up by a schooner. We’ve been searching for you for a long time!”

Bosun Bicklesworth said, “Darr! Were the log file transmitted?”

Twelve said, “Yes! Indeed, it was, Mr. Bicklesworth! That’s how I was able to commission The Grim Ghost for search and rescue.”

Bicklesworth said, “Did she now?” The bosun became very happy, on the inside. “Garr, ya see... on our end Jim Bobson and them said it looked like the log didn’t get written.”

Twelve stood and spun with joy in the gleaming red body suit. “It all got written! We got all of it!”

A klaxon shattered the moment, and the deck pitched thirty degrees or more. A course electric loudhailer blared, “Battle stations! Battle stations!”

Where many jumped to their feet, the bosun’s brow merely sank. He made a mental note of some brine that would need to be scrubbed. Petty Officer Orb dropped into the galley to shout, “Sea monster!”

The Grim Ghost’s bosun came down the well behind him. Near the galley hatch, Bosun Bert advised taking cover under the galley tables. The deck pitched again and men’s dying words and cries filled the room from above.

Over the mostly muted and morose acceptance of the Ascendant, many of whom had done nothing but walk the beach since the last sea monster attack, Bosun Bicklesworth said, “Get back! Get back!” He approached a candlestick holder on the wall and yanked it. It pulled away from the wall like a long brake lever though, to Bosun Bert’s knowledge, it was only held to the wall with two dowel pins. The candlestick became a switch that opened an escape hatch at the back of the dingy, uncheerful galley. Bicklesworth had secret clearance to remote access derealization equipment housed at an undisclosed shipyard from the underbelly of any Guild Navy ship. Pistons let go, and four white jets of compressed air shot into the galley as the escape hatch opened.

Bosun Bicklesworth said, “Down!!!”

As the ship lurched and the hull planks twisted and cracked, the Ascendant in the galley struggled to get through the hatch which was wide enough for only a single person at a time. The Grim Ghost’s crew that were also in the galley at that time knew the torpedoes were stored under the galley, and yet the Ascendant charged below.

The old steamworks on the cement walls of the derealized stairwell was sprayed with heavy-duty, corrosion-resistant plastic. The grotesque flow of the sprayed steamworks was dotted with valves and gauges flashing red, green, blue, and white lights, and other types of shiny or luminescent diagnostics and baubles. The stairs were diamond plate steel coated in chrome, and the lights flashed down a dozen or more switchbacks of the reflective metal scaffolding.

Zipporah looked to Bicklesworth before descending the shaft. Bosun Bicklesworth said, “Hurry now, lass!”

They all felt the ship’s keel break under a mountainous moaning and groaning of The Grim Ghost’s gray old timbers. The cries of the men dying on deck were sliced by the crack and buckle of the largest keel timbers. As Zipporah stepped onto the steel plate, it did not shake, though the galley shook behind her. Such was the nature of the last-ditch, Positive end, dereality escape pod.

A torrent of water washed into the other end of the galley from the main deck stair. Sounds of the fray and chaos followed Zipporah down, but her footing was sure because the shaft did not shake. Behind her, the ship rocked and cracked and began to be crushed by the octopus. Galley portholes popped and the spray of glass sliced the water.

The loudhailer hailed, “Abandon ship!,” so The Grim Ghost’s crew that were witness to Bicklesworth’s magic—truly nothing more than remote derealization—ran for his hatch as well. Twelve descended into the stair, and so did Bosun Bert.

Water poured into the stairwell, but the bosun stood fast and yelled, “She’s prob’ly ok!,” as the first through neared the bottom. A large splinter was in the bosun’s scalp over his ear, and it bled. Descriptio LeFranco in pig form remained behind Bicklesworth because he knew he was detestable to them.

A small tidal wave in the galley took the bosun by surprise, and he thought to secure the hatch. Then the ship lurched again. The water ran in the other direction, so the bosun left

it open as the stragglers struggled for footing among the detritus and debris of the unsecured galley swag. Those still in the galley made their approach to the door where the bosun and the pig held to the wall and were not washed away from the hatch. The bosun head-butted the bulkhead when the ship lurched, and the splinter leaked more blood where it jammed into his scalp.

A thick green tentacle, twice as thick as a man (about as thick as Bosun Bicklesworth), tore in through the galley's overhead and grabbed Able Seaman Chip who was the last man helping the rest at the rear. In a moment, he was enveloped in the slimy sheath of muscle. One explosive constriction gave him a killing aneurysm and popped his abdomen. The tentacle swept between the hatch and the stair where the bridge crew had descended on news of Bicklesworth's hatch relayed to them by Able Seaman Nyone.

Aghast, the paladin blurted in his native Vincian, "No!" He couldn't believe it. *No!* The paladin morphed into a floating cuttlefish. His arms became water intake valves. His legs each became two tentacle arms, and four more tentacle arms came from the pants he was wearing which fell away, as did most of the wormy filth. Zorolo da Vinci zoomed through the air and touched his own tentacles to the big green tentacle before it could grab Able Seaman Schmendrick. The thick tentacular girth relaxed with a vivific sparkly dazzle and then withdrew from the galley. The smallish coastal octopus stopped attacking The Grim Ghost and dove toward the depths leaving a murky cloud of blotchy black ink around the sinking ship. Zorolo could see through the torn open main deck, the galley's overhead, that the main and mizzen masts were broken. The sails were alight with flame. Most of the Ascendant remaining in the galley morphed into cuttlefish. Bosun Bicklesworth was astonished, and many of The Grim Ghost's officers were witness to it.

Before rescuing the four survivors from Braidon Goran's farm, The Grim Ghost picked up those from The Sea Star that

kept going down the beach. Without regard for the non-linear time wave that still existed after The Sea Star's escape pod's derealization engine misfired, that first group marched down the beach for 20 years. By the time The Grim Ghost found the group waiting under the seraph with brazenly swept wings, the Gaians had already found them. The Gaians found them and killed them all, and then they used their native morpho- and chromoelectric skins to impersonate the group that waited. The Grim Ghost recovered the Gaians in good faith as Mr. Black's party found their faces familiar. The cuttlefish repeated what they learned during the interrogations and passed for humans while The Grim Ghost sailed unknowingly on, toward the termination of the Coast Road behind one particular statue.

After the octopus relented in its attack, the bosun said, "Fu-ark." He stepped through the hatch and closed it behind him as The Grim Ghost's hull disintegrated in the absence of the octopus' tight constriction. Bosun Bicklesworth said, "Narr, narr, narr," as he descended the dereality stair.

The paladin's glide across the galley awed the human audience. When the attack abated and the sea swept between the bosun and those that remained, the bosun secured the hatch against the storming flood of the sea. The Grim Ghost's bridge officers returned to the con of the still floating but sinking aft section of the long ship.

In Vincian, the other cephalopods, all cuttlefish, no octopi or squid, said, "Lord Zorolo!" The floating bodies of their many-colored electric skins danced in formation before Lord Zorolo da Vinci. Floating in the air and unaffected by the ship's disintegration, the individual cuttlefish repped their sets with their tentacles, and the paladin took it all in through his W-shaped pupils.

With a few convulsions and a squeezey slurping sound, Lord Zorolo da Vinci, also known as Descriptio LeFranco for a time, also known as Durr Badminton for a shorter time, extruded and spat out the remaining few, big worms onto a broken board. They squirmed on it and Zorolo considered them

the death of Descriptio LeFranco.

Zorolo said, "Baron Galionelli, give me your light saber."

Galionelli said, "Of course, m'lord." The metal shaft appeared among his tentacles, and then he morphed into a golden retriever so the handle was in his mouth like a bone. In dog form, he dropped onto a few floor planks nailed securely to a structural beam protruding from The Grim Ghost's listing stern section. Baron Galionelli tossed it into the air and morphed into a white horse as he spun around. Like a hackey sack, the baron lobbed the saber to Zorolo da Vinci with the kick of a hind hoof. The rickety platform which supported him made a snapping sound, so, while his light saber flew through the air, the baron morphed into a samurai warrior. He clung to a more secure portion of the sinking ship in heavy plate and wielding a long bow, but also with two swords and a wakizashi in his belt. On his back was a quiver full of arrows crossed by two silk banners blowing in the sea wind that pierced the broken room, which was, by then, only an open space on the sea near a wrecked and sinking ship. One banner showed a golden dragon on a flat white background. The other showed a red phoenix on a patterned green, black, and white background.

Zorolo da Vinci, still floating, caught the light saber and powered it on. The worms wriggled on the board, four big ones. The paladin tapped them with the tip of the light saber. They cooked, sizzled, and popped. Then the worms were toast. The paladin returned the baron's weapon and dove into the sea to retrieve his own sinking sword from the depths.

Able Seaman Roscoe, next to Baron Galionelli, morphed into an old-timey guy in a tweed jacket and pants, and with a brownish deer hunter's cap. He flashed the badge pinned inside his lapel and drew a stainless steel .44 snub-nosed six shooter. He said over the unlit smoking pipe at the corner of his mouth, "Agent Markel Markel, Internal Affairs! Everybody freeze!" Then the remnant of the ship lurched, and he was plunged into the sea where he drowned.

The bosun rounded the last turn of the stairwell and came

onto the deck of a ship not known to exist: The Grim Ghost 2. Three hundred yards off the starboard side, the ghost of The Grim Ghost took water and sank. Seeing the ship appear where there had been none, the wrecked crew's survivors called for aid. By the time the rescue launches were in the water, The Grim Ghost was only a few floating timbers and not a ship at all. Many were drowned beneath the sails.

The bosun shouted to the men in the skiffs, "Humans only now, aye. Rest of 'em can float."

The cuttlefish disguised as Ascendant on The Grim Ghost 2, those who had passed through the bosun's derealization portal, were offended and reverted to their true form. A few cuttlefish masquerading as men treading water did the same. All took flight and formed a circle high in the air where they patrolled in a clockwise fashion. A moment later, Zorolo da Vinci breached the surface, Land Waster in tentacle, and joined the circular congress high in the sky.

When everyone from the water was on The Grim Ghost 2, Bosun Bicklesworth said, "Where's Captain FitzCullen?"

Captain FitzCullen's second mate, Leftenant Commander Gopal, said, "He were mashed against the deck. Aye, he were. Saw it with me own eyes."

The bosun said, "That makes Captain Atlas senior man."

Captain Atlas took command. He ordered a survey of the ship. When the junior officers departed the quarterdeck, Captain Atlas invited the bosun, FitzCullen's former first mate, Commander Nerli, and Gopal into the new ship's luxurious board room.

Everything a captain should want was in there. Maps and charts and logbooks, all empty, and ink and quills. The captain admired the ornate mahogany plaque over the hatch which read: THE GRIM GHOST TOO. She was a long ship, seven-masted like The Grim Ghost but not so narrow as her namesake.

The captain sat in the captain's chair and kicked his bare feet up on the desk. He said, "Have a seat, men." Then he



added, “Reckon thurr some proper boots aboard?” He tossed his old bicorne cover onto the hat hook and hooked it fine despite the ship’s oceanic gait.

Gopal said, “Aye, reckon so.”

They sat in silence, and then the captain took a more serious posture in the finely gilded chair with purple and crimson velvet. He said to the bosun, “So the derealization engine dumped you right back on top of us, huh?”

The bosun said, “Best we can tell. Yarr.”

Gopal said, “I think the real question be why ye brought that pig aboard The Grim Ghost! She were a good ship, aye, a good ship and—”

The captain said, “A good ship she were. Yarr, yarr, yarr. The Sea Star’s lost too, so shut it.” The captain and the bosun exchanged glances. They discussed with The Grim Ghost’s remaining senior officers the yarn told on The Grim Ghost 2’s quarterdeck moments before: the pig, the octopus, the Eternal Enemy, all of it.

Gopal said, “No disrespect, Captain, but did we bring a pig ont—”

The captain said, “Shut the fuck up. You’re dismissed. Go see about a telescopic spectacle and some proper uniforms, would ya?”

Leftenant Commander Gopal was mortified. He enjoyed much greater esteem under Captain FitzCullen, but he was a good Navy man. He said, “Aye aye, Captain,” and marched out of the Victorian boardroom with its smell of parchment and comfy wooden panels.

The bosun said, “Garr, I guess we could still be inside The Sea Star’s derealizer. They say, so they do, that one must never fire a derealization engine while another nearby is running.”

The captain said, “Bad for reality, yeah, yeah. I know. Get Jim Bobson in here, would ya?”

The bosun opened the hatch and told Petty Officer Jong to find Jim Bobson. Jong said, “Aye, Master Chief,” and then shouted for Jim Bobson.

Commander Nerli said, “Was that your man Bobson or my man Sperg?” The two black-suited science officers were quite similar in the face.

The bosun said, “They’s both out there.”

Nerli said, “Then let’s get Sperg in here too.”

The captain yelled past the bosun, “Get Sperg in here too.”

Petty Officer Jong said, “Aye aye, Cap’m,” and shouted for the second man as well.

The captain and the bosun enjoyed a patient silence with Nerli until Jim Bobson arrived. He wrapped on the door three times, and the captain said, “Come in.” When the door opened, he said, “Jong!”

“Captain!”

“Send your man in when he gets here, no need to knock.”

“Aye, Cap’m.”

Jim Bobson, standing in the hatch ajar, said, “I think you should come out here.”

The captain stepped into the light followed by Nerli and Bicklesworth. They gazed at the sky. About the circling patrol of cuttlefish, the blue sky faded to pink and purple sunset and then turned to starry night. Two orange planets floated next to each other where high noon would have been.

The captain scanned the horizon and did not see the seraphim. He mounted the poopdeck where he could see all around save through the seven sails. There were no statues in sight, no beach, no steep jungle wall as tall as the sky. He was back on the Negative Fractal. He pounded his fists on the Ghost’s gunnel and said, “Yes!” Then a pang of remorse punched him in the gut. A quick glance about reassured him. The Grim Ghost’s floating debris was still with them.

# 28

THE captain was in The Grim Ghost 2's crow's nest when he ordered hard to port. The telescopic spectacle came away from his eye for the first time in an hour. He scanned for one piece of debris among all The Grim Ghost's wreckage, and then he held the spectacle to his eye again. He glanced at the Vincians floating in the sky above. Then, at last, he spotted The Sea Star's banged-up wheel bobbing in the waves. High above, one orange planet began to occult the other one in the depths of space.

In detente, Captain Atlas descended from the crow's nest. Nerli, the captain's de facto first mate, was embittered with impatience waiting for his return. Still, Nerli was glad when Captain Atlas found his wheel. Then the crew retrieved it. The captain would have replaced The Grim Ghost 2's wheel right then and there, but The Sea Star's wheel was too big. The deck of The Grim Ghost 2 would have been in the way.

The captain was glad to have his wheel back and glad not to have to strap it back on his back. He furled the charts on the navigation table so he could lay it there. He opened the cubby under the table to stow the charts that showed him nothing familiar or obviously useful. In the cubby, however, he found something most obviously useful: a quantum compass. The captain said, "Mr. Bicklesworth, if you please?" The

captain directed the bosun's attention into the cubby.

Bicklesworth approached and concurred with the captain. "Yarr, tharr she is, aye."

Nerli said, "What is it?"

The captain said, "It's a quantum compass."

Nerli said, "Lemme see," and he barged between the two very big men to peer below the table. He said, "Darr," and set the compass on the table.

Seeing that Nerli meant not wait for instruction, the captain said, "Go ahead, Nerli." Nerli fixed it securely to the table, and then the three of them waited for the needle to stabilize. The needle seemed to settle, but then the rock of the ship would kick it again. It swirled wildly. The captain secured his wheel to the bulkhead.

The captain said to Jong, "Get Jim Bobson up here."

Jong said, "Aye, Cap'm"

Nerli said, "And get Sperg up here too."

Jim Bobson and Sperg unfitted and then refitted the compass on the table. The reading refused to read right, and Jim Bobson said, "With your permission, Captain, I'd like to go belowdecks and look for some diagnostic equipment."

The captain said, "Go."

Sperg said, "No! No! No! It's working fine, it's just the table isn't fitted right."

Jim Bobson said, "How can you tell if it's the table or the compass?"

Sperg said, "I just can, ok? It's the table, ok? This stupid table is the problem." He unhitched the compass and inspected the compass' inlay.

Jim Bobson said, "Ok, well... I'm going belowdecks to look for some diagnostic equipment."

Sperg became irate. He said, "No! It's not the compass, it's the table. Commander, I—"

The captain said, "What the fuck's he got to do with it?"

Sperg rocked anxiously on his feet, and his face began to spaz. "Captain! Commander, I—"

The captain said, “Jim Bobson, go ahead.” Jim Bobson went below.

Sperg said, “You’re wasting time, Captain! I’m telling you, it’s the table. Who here besides me is certified in compiometry?”

The captain looked at Nerli, and even Nerli knew his man went too far. The captain said, “Stand at attention, Lieutenant Sperg.”

Sperg, shaking uncontrollably and with his twisted face registering nothing but contempt, said, “Commander, I— ”

Nerli said, “Stand at attention, Lieutenant.” Sperg fell silent, yet disdain remained on his face and shifty feet.

The captain said, “I’m the captain of this ship.” Much louder he said, “And the next time I have to clarify that, it will be on a blindfold walk down the plank!” He said to Sperg, “Ya unnerstan’at?”

Sperg said, “Yes, Captain.”

The captain said to Nerli, “I don’t think your man understands that he’s my man now.”

Nerli said, “Aye, Cap’m.”

The captain said, “What’s your major malfunction, Sperg?”

Sperg said, “It’s not my malfunction! It’s your malfunction! You brought that pig on our ship—”

He didn’t stop talking when the captain told Petty Officer Jong to escort Lieutenant Sperg to the brig.

Sperg’s voice trailed away, “—and now you say, ‘Check if the compass is broken, not the table.’ It’s the table! It’s the table!”

The captain said to Nerli, “I hope we’re not going to have a problem here, Commander.”

Nerli said, “No, Captain.” Then he said, “But don’t you think it could be the table?”

The captain had no experience with sailors from the Positive Fleet, though he’d heard rumors which were all proven true aboard The Grim Ghost 2. He said, “Commander, how

would one assess the connector on the table without first calibrating the quantum diagnostics?” Nerli had no answer. The captain said, “You Positive boys have your way of doing things, but I’m a Negative man, and you’ll walk the plank before I let these men think we’re running a Positive crew on my ship. Ya unnerstan’at?”

Nerli said, “Understood,” but his there was an undercurrent.

The captain became angry and said, “Understood... Captain.”

The captain wondered if he saw a further flash of disrespect in Nerli’s eye when he said, “Understood, Captain,” but he couldn’t be sure and didn’t want to make more of a scene than he already had. Every sailor that could see watched, and more popped up by the moment.

Jim Bobson returned with a clunky, many-pouched tool belt around his waist, and a duffel bag full of gear. He tested the compass and the table twice. When it told him all was well, he tested it again. Jim Bobson reported to the captain in the boardroom that the compass was in good order and simply had no heading.

The captain returned to the table and was unhappy with the bearing when he read it. He assembled all the remaining Guildsmen, forty-five of them besides the twenty-one remaining Ascendant. The Negative Fractal (the sea under the hole in the sky was known to the Guild as The Fractal) was familiar to sailors from The Sea Star and, being part of the same Fractal Field, the captain assumed the Positive sailors’ sense of Exland was the same. A feel for Fractal water, so it was said, was a feel for Fractal water, positive or negative.

The captain addressed the crew, “This ship is equipped with a quantum compass. I don’t think it’s pointing to Exland. It’s not pointing at all really, but it’s waving around in a direction... and I think Exland is the other way.” He let that sink in for a moment, and then asked for the sense of the ship. “All of you close your eyes. On three, I want you to point to Exland. One.

Two.”

On three, they all pointed generally to port, and among them mostly to the port side aft. The crew’s sense of Exland agreed with the captain’s own, and he was glad that his senses were intact. However, he did not want to acknowledge what the compass said or that he knew they would likely never get to Exland without an exact heading. In its jittery brokenness, the quantum compass was telling him to sail, he thought, away from Exland. Nevertheless, the captain accepted Jim Bobson’s assessment and called his officers into the boardroom.

Behind the desk, the captain said, “Two things. One: the quantum compass. Two: the sky squid.”

The bosun, Master Chief Petty Officer Bicklesworth, Lieutenant Commander Black who was the sailing master on The Sea Star, Commander Nerli, and five more lieutenants and ensigns waited for the captain.

The captain said, “Two. Any suggestions?”

Commander Nerli said, “Archers. We’ve bows and arrows below.”

Bosun Bicklesworth said, “Narr, now! This Zorolo fella answered our challenge true, he did. Bo! The law’s the law! Aye, she do! Just so.”

The captain said, “I witnessed the challenge. So did my ensign.” Ensign Fernando was killed in the most recent attack. “The law’s the law.”

Nerli said, “Alright. One of them, just one mind ya, answered the challenge, not all of them.”

The three Positive Lieutenants agreed.

“Arrows!”

“Kill them!”

“Darr!”

The bosun said, “Garr!!! ‘Ave ye not listened to a word of it? Ol’ Squiddy stopped the attack on yer damned ship! Yarr, we saw it with me own eyes. He were ‘hind me and then there’s ol’ Squiddy flying by and the pig’s clothes ‘re ‘hind me but there’s no pig in ‘em! Not a piggy trace!!! Narr, not fer Mr.

Piggy Squiddy, we wouldna pulled a one from the water, narrr! Narr but yarr, a thousand leagues under ye'd be by now if not fer ol' Squiddy. A thousand leagues, aye." The bosun meant to say that the survivors pulled from the wreckage likely owed their lives to Zorolo da Vinci, and that they were being ungrateful about it. The bosun was sorely displeased with the un-Guildly demeanor. The captain was too. They discussed it some more and came to the captain's preordained decision: parley.

Zorolo da Vinci monitored the thoughts of the men on the ship below. When the captain said, "Parley it is then," he broke formation and floated down near a porthole in the boardroom's starboard side. The paladin tapped on the porthole and shimmered electric language that the captain couldn't understand. The captain pointed forward along the ship, and the paladin floated around to the boardroom hatch.

The captain asked Ensign Ghern to open the door when the paladin's knock came. Zorolo was in the familiar monkey form known in Vineton as *Descriptio LeFranco*. At that time, the prisoner was about six hours inland.

On the beach, Ensign Fernando was unable to answer the paladin's return challenge, so the captain asked the junior officers to give them the room. According to the law, the paladin had seniority on them. The bosun remained, and the two commanders remained. The five alone sat in silence.

The captain, the bosun, and the two commanders, Black and Nerli, waited for the paladin to speak, and he waited for them. The captain used his finger to tip over an hour glass on the desk, and the sands of time poured.

The paladin smiled at the drama and said, "No reason for me to stay quiet is there?"

Captain Atlas said, "S'pose not."

"So..."

"So what?"

The paladin smiled and said, "So, I suppose you're wondering who we are."



Commander Nerli scoffed, and the captain said, “Aye.”

The paladin said, “I’ve told you my story—”

Commander Nerli said, “I ain’t heard a word.”

The paladin repeated what he’d relayed on beach.

Mr. Black listened intently as the paladin retold his story about infiltrating the Guild. In the retelling, the paladin joined the Guild instead of infiltrating it, and that was nearly as true as what he could have said about infiltration. Mr. Black said, “And where is Gaia?”

The paladin said, “From here? I have no idea.”

The bosun said, “Barr! I’ll be ‘im who asks it then! Why’s ‘alf our charge turned to octopuses?”

The paladin said, “Ah. Yes.” The tedious part was come at last. Having already told his tale thrice, on the beach, to Twelve, and again just then, he said, “I have no objection to the presence of the other officers.”

The captain told Jong to send them back in.

When they returned, Zorolo da Vinci began. “Just as I was sent to join the Guild, the growing influence of the Dark Mage, your Eternal Enemy, catalyzed very many missions beyond Gaia. A ranger long patrol was ravaged in a storm and somehow came along that cursed beach. They patrolled the coastal waters forever and day. At the end of that final day, they sensed conscious beings on the shore. Those were your men and Ascendant charges. They were expecting rescue, and so our patrol, the Gaian patrol, dispatched them after a period of interrogation.” The paladin’s audience remained silently stoic, so he went on. “The patrol assumed the identity of each being on the beach, and, after some time, The Grim Ghost cast launches and recovered them from the shore. From what they tell me, that was about six of your *months* ago.”

One of The Sea Star ensigns, Ensign Romeo, interjected, “But I spoke about the viewing with Ken! He couldn’t have known if he were already a... *thing*.”

The paladin saw the eyes around him narrow. He said, “We have psychic powers far beyond your own. And,” no point

being gentle, “our methods of interrogation... they are thorough.”

The captain took it in stride that the things that saved them that day killed the Ascendant and crew in the third group. He thought it was shameful when they decided to stop walking. If it had been the second group, the one led by Mr. Black, then his mental calculus might have been different. If it had been very different, then the paladin would have killed the remaining humans and searched for Gaia with the rangers circling above.

The captain said to the paladin, “Leave us.”

Those that remained in the boardroom were split about what to do. Bicklesworth grew irritated with Nerli’s dissent and said, “Shut up, Nerli! He’s a Guild Knight of the Fifth Degree! He knows ‘is knowledge. The law is the law, and it’s a crime, in my mind, to even say what’s being said right now. And I saw it with me own eyes! Yarr, that fella Zorolo saved as many today as were killed then. That’s it! Garr! The law’s the facken law! Am I right, Captain? Tell ‘em how she be! Barby barr, barr.”

Commander Nerli, who favored an immediate, direct assault on the squid, was greatly displeased at Bicklesworth’s insolence. In truth, there was no impudence. Nerli outranked the bosun in the Navy, but Bosun Bicklesworth also held secret Guild rank, a curious confluence of the intermingling of the Positive and Negative crews.

Before Nerli could censure the bosun, the captain said, “Aye. The law’s the law. The law says that’s Guild Knight of the Fifth Degree Descriptio LeFranco, and I’ll not slaughter those who are known to him today. They’ll accompany us to Exland. That’s the end of it. Get Jim Bobson in here.”

The captain asked about the quantum compass, and Jim Bobson assured him that he had carried out full diagnostics. Jim Bobson said, “And to the extent that I can trust the diagnostic equipment on this ship, the compass is working correctly, Captain.”

“So there’s nothing to do then?”

“Not that I can think of, Captain.” Hesitantly he added, “But that man Sperg seems to have some, ahhh... ideas of his own.”

The captain said, “You can go down there and talk to him, but he’s not coming out today.”

Jim Bobson said, “Perhaps I shall, Captain.”

The senior officers deliberated and agreed there was one conclusion more likely than the rest. The captain said it first. “The whole kernel of truth among the remaining Ascendant must be with them’s that’s still ashore.”

The bosun said, “Tarr!” He’d already written them off for dead, but he too thought it the most likely cause for the fidgety compass needle.

Jim Bobson said, “If it,” *it* being the kernel of truth, “were shared among those aboard now, I expect the compass would be pointing to Exland.”

The captain ground his gnarly knuckles into his face. “But that’s the thing.”

Commander Nerli said, “Yeah, I know. Right?”

The bosun said, “Yarr.”

The captain said, “It *could* be pointing to Exland,” referring to the non-specific semidirectionality of the needle which would not settle. The assembled Guildsmen had only considered the case when the sense of the crew was true. “In this damn place of who knows what and when knows how, we could all be thrown askew!”

Jim Bobson said, “Yes, Captain. If the derealization engine misfired, then we could all be, even now, inside the reality wave, even after the proper firing that followed.” None knew for sure, but they were very much still inside the reality wave. None knew at all, but they were soon to emerge.

As if on cue when the captain said, “Dismissed,” a great commotion erupted outside. The senior officers and Jim Bobson rushed onto the quarterdeck where it was plain to see. The sky at the zenith was sunny and blue, but the rest of the broad sky reaching to the horizon was night and stormy. The depth

of the rock of the ship increased with each passing wave.

The captain said, "What happened, Ensign?"

Ensign Romeo said, "Captain! One minute we were making ready. The next we were waking up in this beam of light." The thin column of light from the patch of sunny sky above shown down like a soft laser beam. A great gust of wind whipped up, and the sails cracked taut. The winds drove the quickly increasing rains into the column of light where prismatic rainbows danced among the raindrops.

The captain rushed to the table, but the needle on the quantum compass was spinning around wildly. The captain unhitched the tether from the wheel of The Grim Ghost 2. With his massive muscles, the captain wheeled the wheel around. Captain Atlas, among the finest captains in the Guild Navy, would take it on instinct. He barked, "Down the port sails! Ready Caspar's rig to the starboard stern."

Navy discipline dashed the disorientation and dismay. The crew set to work on The Grim Ghost 2 as the captain put his back into the wheel. In a moment, the gust became a strong wind and then a mean wind, and before the ship was turned ninety degrees, they were in hurricane conditions. The hurricane wind brought hurricane waves.

The bosun went about herding the remaining Ascendant belowdecks, but his voice was lost in the storm. Impossibly fast, the sea was churning with waves where it had been as calm as a picnic table only moments before. The calls of, "Wave! Wave!" were also lost in the howling wind when a big breaker bore down on the ship. It broke over the bulwark protecting the waist where the last few Ascendant filed below. The water crashed on deck and took them. It took the bosun too. The last three Ascendant were washed through a break in the bulwark used for loading. The tidal forces took the bosun there too.

Bosun Bicklesworth's seamanship was too much for the tempest, however, and he planted his feet against the bulwark as he washed through the gap. The water brought him to his

feet in the breach, and then the water was gone. Another galleon would have done the bosun in, but fortune smiled on the Guild that day. Fortune did that every day, else the Eternal Enemy would have crushed the Guild long ago.

The captain swung the wheel over again with his feet planted fast. Another giant wave came, but The Grim Ghost climbed it and fell into the trough behind. At the crest, the captain surveyed the nighttime seascape even as the column of light darkened the darkness around them. There were other waves but none close and monstrous. At the crest of the next wave, the captain ordered, “Starboard stern, deploy the rig!”

Commander Nerli repeated the command, and the ship shook as Caspar’s rig bit back at the storm.

Behind the captain and before him, the sails cracked and the ropes snapped, and he could feel she was a good ship and true. Through the sharp rustle of the wind finding purchase on every facet and line, Captain Atlas barked, “Make ready to deploy rig all around!”

Commander Nerli barked, “Make rig ready all ‘round!”

Even in the stir of the storm, the captain felt the ship land on the right heading: the heading as best he could figure it with the compass all thrown askew. On course, the captain hitched the tether back on the wheel. He barked, “Execute Caspar’s rig all around!”

The ship lurched as the electric hum of Caspar’s rig momentarily drown out the wind’s howling soul. A master helmsman, the captain closed his eyes and felt the ship he did not know. He’d set them on the true heading for a moment, but they were off it again. Without the compass there was no finding the exact course, infinite precision and all that, but the captain still knew his error. The little compass in his mind told him so.

The captain unhitched the wheel and steered a bit further. A white flash and brutal baritone thunderclap jarred his senses. The wetness in the main mast turned to steam, and the mast exploded. It threw two men overboard, and a further two were

bled out in moments.

As if Zeus himself were throwing down from Mount Olympus, lightning smashed the fore and jigger masts. The captain held the wheel but felt his control on the ship wane. He pushed hard as another wave threatened to capsize them. He pushed hard enough, and the ship climbed and fell again. Then lightning took the driver and spanker masts, and the ship was well on fire when the captain felt the little pull of the compass in his mind tell him they were sailing true again. Only the mizzen and pusher masts remained, and the winds were liable to rip Caspar's rig away at any moment. The ship crested another big wave, but the biting deluge turned to hail, and the captain had to look away lest the ice gouge his eyes.

Blinded, the ship crashed behind a crest. A good enough sized rock of hail cracked the captain atop his coarse countenance, square in the forehead, and knocked him out cold. In that instant where consciousness left him, the pillar of light bathing the ship exploded. The night and storm receded. Everyone on deck fainted and woke moments later to the dawn sunrise illuminating an unbroken sky. The sky faded in tan, orange, and red at one horizon all the way to deep purple above an impossibly high green wall.

The captain woke with blood running down his face. He commanded the fire relief. The skilled sailors fought the fire and put it back, and the captain saw the ship would not burn. When the captain looked opposite the rising sun, he saw sun beams creep down the face of a new seraph. It was made of jade and semi-translucent unlike any seen before. The sun rose, and the light crept down the magic lady's breast, and then her legs and feet. Then the crew of *The Grim Ghost* could see the beach below the jungle and more jade seraphim sparkling in the morning light, up and down the coast, as far as the eye could see.

# 29

SUPER G stayed on the Great Plains for a long time. After he showed Man Whose Enemies Are Afraid Of His Bandwidth how to attack the dinosaurs in their nests, Man Whose Enemies Are Afraid Of His Bandwidth went north to proselytize the snake-frog/hammer technique, and Super G went south looking for pigs to kill. Super G roamed for a long time and annihilated every pig he found. While there were still southern dinosaur nests, he annihilated them too. When dinosaurs and pigs were rare, he returned to the tribe to which Ban belonged. He spent four generations with them before ranging south again. It was the most peaceful time of his long life.

At the time of his return to the tribe to which Ban had belonged, his friend Ban had already gone to be with his ancestors. Ban's grandson was chief at that time, Chief Cuts From Bool.

In the third of those four generations, a child of the tribe, Callipygian Cookie, was stung on the thumb by a pig-scorpion. She was alone and playing beyond earshot. If not for Super G's super senses, she would have surely died. Super G did hear her cries on the wind, so he went to her. He found her in the arroyo where she wept.

Super G said, "What's wrong, girl?" By that time, the poison was working, her throat was swollen, and she could not

answer. Super G scooped her fragile little body up in his arms and brought her back to her family.

Callipygian Cookie's father was on a hunt, but her mother was there. Mellifluous Maiden said, "Callipygian Cookie! You tell us what's wrong right now or Imma spank you!"

Although the girl's tongue was too swollen for speaking, she was afraid of her mother's spankings and extended her hand. Her little thumb, not so little, was swollen thrice the size of her other fingers.

Mellifluous Maiden took her daughter's hand and examined it. She said, "Was it a burr fly?"

The little girl shook her head no. Though the pain and fear burned, her mother's presence comforted her.

Mellifluous Maiden said, "Was it a rat buzzer?"

Callipygian Cookie shook her head again and coughed and spasmed, but her throat was almost too swollen even to choke. Still, in the calm presence of her mother, and the strong and legendary arms of Super G, she made a gesture. She waved the index finger on her other hand in the air and then zapped her wounded hand with it. They all understood.

Chief Cuts From Bool exclaimed, "A scorpion!"

Mellifluous Maiden's heart sunk. She said, "Listen, little Cookie, tell me now, ay. Was it a bug-scorpion or a pig-scorpion?"

The little girl nodded no when her mother said bug-scorpion and nodded yes when she said pig-scorpion. Soon thereafter, the medicine man arrived from his own teepee on the outskirts of the teepee town. He said, "What ails this girl, ay?"

Over her daughter's chortled wheezing, Mellifluous Maiden said, "She was bit on the hand by a pig-scorpion!" At that time, the girl was resting on a blanket, and Super G was standing back.

The medicine man said, "Super G. Run to the riverbed and gather a handful of hollow reeds. Hurry now, her fate is in your hands, ay."

Super G sprinted from them and covered the five miles to



the reeds in almost five minutes. He was back with reeds in less than ten. On his final approach, he heard the wailing of the mother and the others, and he thought he was too late. The girl had stopped breathing and was unconscious, but the medicine man made quick work sifting the reeds. Then he intu-bated Callipygian Cookie through the notch above her clavicle. He blew into the reed, and the girl's chest rose. He gave her chest compressions, and the girl regained consciousness, though her entire body was grotesquely misshapen with swelling.

By the time her father returned from the hunt, she was recovered though frail and weak. Formats For Big Endian heard how Callipygian Cookie was only just saved by the supernatural speed of Super G, so he dedicated the hunt to Super G and threw a feast in his honor. On that day and in all the years that followed, the tribe to which Ban had belonged celebrated Super G Saves the Day Day.

After another week passed, the girl was back to full health. Super G saw her playing with the other children, and he called to her. "Come here, little Cookie, ay."

She said, "Nah. I'm playing."

Mellifluous Maiden also watched her daughter play, still slightly addled from the close encounter with catastrophe. She said, "Callipygian Cookie! You listen to him like you would I or your father, ay." The little girl excused herself from the childishness and meekly approached Super G who still scared her somewhat, though he had been with them all her life.

Super G said, "Tell me how you got hurt, sweetheart."

Callipygian Cookie said, "You know, ay. Already told ya." She demurred bashfully.

Super G said, "I'm going to tell you something, sweetheart, but I want you to tell me first." He handed her a honey biscuit, and her bright eyes brightened. Honey biscuits were her favorite. She bashfully began to munch on it while she considered running away back to the other children. Super G was kneeling, but then he sat Indian style and invited her to sit in

his lap where he draped a blanket to soften the seat of his hard old bones.

She sat, and Super G gave her another honey biscuit, though she was hardly started on the first. Mellifluous Maiden scolded him, "Don't spoil her now!" She said to her daughter, "You don't eat both of those now, young lady. You don't want to end up like 'Too Much Milk.'" It was a rude name for Tumescient Milkies, a very fat woman in the tribe.

Super G enjoyed the little girl's cuteness as she settled into his blanket and munched the biscuit. He said, "So tell me, child. Tell me, ay."

Callipygian Cookie said she was chasing a flutterby when she saw the pig-scorpion floating in the stream. She thought it would drown, so she pulled it out. When she did, it stung her. She dropped it, and then Super G saved her. She said, "Thanks by the way, ay."

Super G said, "You're very welcome, little girl, and I am very, very glad that you're ok. You could have died, ay!" He booped her on the nose with his bony finger. "Now listen to me close, Callipygian Cookie. Whenever you see a pig-scorpion in the water, you must let it drown. Whenever you see one on land, you must mash it with a rock! If you see it and don't smash it, then the next time someone might not see it and it might sting them, and they might not be so lucky as you were, ay. Do you understand?"

The girl said, "No!"

Super G said, "What don't you understand, sweetheart?"

The girl said, "I understand what you said, Mr. G, but I don't want to kill it. It's a living thing and I should not take its life, ay."

Super G would have smiled widely if there was any flesh on his face, but instead his jaw swung open only the smallest bit.

The girl said, "And if we save its life then it will say, 'Imma be nice to people now because they were nice to me,' and then no one will get bit by pig-scorpions anymore."

Super G said, "Well, first off, little Cookie, it didn't bite you.

It stung you. If it bit you, then that would have meant it was trying to eat you, which would at least have made sense, ay. That pig-scorpion stung you with the stinger on its rear end. Even though you were only trying to help it, it wanted you to die. That's the nature of all scorpions, but especially pig-scorpions. Do you understand?"

The girl said, "No!"

Super G said, "It's in their nature, you see. No matter how nice or kind you might be to a pig-scorpion, it will never say, 'Imma be nice because so and so was nice to me first.'" She didn't look up from her biscuit. "What happened to that nasty scorpion after it stung you, missy?"

"I don't know, ay."

"I'll tell you what happened. He fell right back in that water and drowned, ay."

Callipygian Cookie said, "Prolly so, ay."

Super G said, "Prolly definitely, little girl. It wanted to hurt you so bad that it was willing to die if it meant you would die too." The girl tongued the honey center of her biscuit. Super G said, "It's their nature. You must always mash them with a rock when you see them, or leave them in the stream, but never touch them."

The girl said, "Nah! He was prolly just scared because he was drowning and did it on accident."

Super G looked at Mellifluous Maiden who was watching the life lesson with interest. She smiled at him, and he shrugged. Super G said, "Well, go give that other biscuit to your mother and maybe she'll let you have it after dinner."

At that, Mellifluous Maiden glared at him with wide-eyed awe. *Two honey biscuits in one day! Why, I never...*

After that, Super G scavenged around on the plain until he found a pig-scorpion. It took fifteen days because pig-scorpions were very rare in the region where the tribe kept their teepee town. When he found it, he pinned it with his finger and inspected the small creature which was about five inches long

from nose to stinger. Each of the six legs ended in a tiny cloven hoof. From the insectile thorax protruded a tiny pink pig's head with triangular ears and a stout snout.

Super G brought the thing back to the teepee town in a small leather pouch. When he found Mellifluous Maiden, he asked her, "Can I borrow Callipygian Cookie for a while?"

"Whatever for, Super G?"

"I've trapped a pig-scorpion here, and I want to teach her a lesson about how dangerous they are."

The mother said, "Oh! I told her just what you told her. Whenever she sees one, she should smash it with a rock, ay."

Super G said, "So...?"

The mother said, "Sure, but no honey biscuits!"

When Super G found Callipygian Cookie, he coaxed her to come along with a honey biscuit and said, "Don't tell your mother though, ay. She said no honey *biscuits* with an S, but this is just one honey *biscuit*, so I think you can have it, ay. Do you think you can have it?"

Callipygian Cookie said, "I sure do, Mr. G. I love one honey biscuit just as much as I love honey *biscuitsss*," and she gave a precocious wink.

Super G brought her down into the arroyo where he found her that sad day. He caught a fat snake-frog from among the many that lived there. He said, "Now watch here, sweetie. I'm going to show you something about the nature of pig-scorpions." Snake-frogs were also nasty creatures, but, in general, they shied away from contact with humans.

The girl said, "I know, mister. My mom told me the same thing you did, that I should mash 'em with a rock when I see 'em so they don't sting the next person that sees 'em."

Super G said, "That's right. And she probably gave you a honey biscuit to agree with her, ay?"

Callipygian Cookie giggled gleefully and said, "How did you know, Mr. G?"

Super G said, "Just like this pig-scorpion has a nature, you have a nature too, little girl."

She giggled some more and blushed. When she finished, Super G said, "But seriously, sweetheart, remember what you see today. I'm going to put this pig-scorpion on the back of this snake-frog and set them both in the stream. If the pig-scorpion had a brain, it would know not to sting the snake-frog because then they will both die, the frog from poison and the scorpion from drowning, ay. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mr. G."

Super G lowered the snake-frog into the still water out of the current and held it by its back legs. With his other hand, he loosened the drawstring on the leather pouch and reached in for the pig-scorpion. He said, "Every nasty pig-thing you see, if you can kill it, then you must kill it. It's in their nature to kill you, ay." He held it out and Callipygian Cookie inspected its little pink pig face.

She said, "It's so ugly."

The pig scorpion said in a tone so high that only a child or super auditory skeleton could hear, "*Oink! Squee!*"

Super G said, "And just like it's ugly on the outside, its spirit is ugly on the inside. I'm going to set him on this snake-frog, and just you watch. The scorpion will strike, and they will both die." Then he lowered the pig-scorpion which was very angry about being held by Super G's bones. It furiously struck at him and broke its stinger on his thumb bone.

He told her that then the show wouldn't work because the nasty thing broke its stinger on his thumb. She laughed and ran back to the teepee town with the other half of her honey biscuit.

# 30

BOSUN Bicklesworth was sleeping near the hatch and didn't quite wake when his new bosun's mate, the bosun from The Grim Ghost, Bosun's Mate Bert, flung open the hatch. The captain followed him out with telescopic spectacle in hand. Commander Nerli followed behind and slammed the hatch shut. The sleeping Bosun farted loudly, crossed and uncrossed his arms, and tried to go back to the dream he was having.

Commander Nerli said, "Garr! Darr! To yer bunk witcher foul siren's arse." He kicked the bosun's boot none too softly.

Bicklesworth awoke with a start and quaint follow-on squeaker. The bosun said, "Tarr, ya bastard! We were dreaming o' fairer things. Aye, we were. Snarr."

The new bosun's mate said, "Gronk, tell the captain what you told me."

Able Seaman Gronk said, "Barr! We were watchin'— I were watchin' rather, I myself alone— the jungle— we weren't alone persay because we're here with together if ya take—"

The captain said, "Pull it together, man! Tell me what you saw."

Behind them, Bicklesworth leaned forward and lifted his tree trunk of a leg breaking wind to his full and utter satisfaction. The swabbie scrubbing brine near the hatch recoiled when he heard it, and Nerli gave the bosun a dirty look.

Bicklesworth stood proud and returned the commander's gaze. Gronk started talking, but the two big men's gaze was its own private universe.

Bicklesworth shook his head no and said, "Narr."

Nerli thought to build a scene on his perception of superior rank right then and there, but he snarled and gave his attention to Able Seaman Gronk.

Pointing to an exposed cliff face breaking through the canopy, Gronk said, "Arrr! It were right there. Aye, it were. Unmistakable! There were a gold flash and then a rock slide. You can't see it now, but yonder tree line gained, garr she did, that divot thurr when yonder rock slide crumpled 'em trees. Yarr. Divot, darr, dey do." He was proud of what he felt was his ability not to garble his words while speaking to the captain.

The captain uniped the periscopic telescope and examined the divot in the tree line at the base of the rock face. He scanned all across the ridge at the top of the coastal range and couldn't see anything. No gold, no rock slide, he saw no motion at all save the undulation of the deep green canopy in the wind and the blue-green breakers lapping at the beach far below.

The captain said, "A shore party is in order in any case." It was the second day since the jade seraphim appeared, and those who had not met Braido Goran were in no hurry to do so. The captain's and bosun's heads were wrapped in white bandages, the captain's over the top and the bosun's around the sides. The captain himself was still torn regarding his remaining charges. Eighteen of the Ascendant that boarded The Sea Star at the Port of Higher Calls were aboard The Grim Ghost 2. He'd left nearly as many beyond the beach. The law put it at his discretion what to do. Captain Atlas said, "Aye, a shore party."

The other cephalopods were gone after the sky inverted. Nerli, unaware of the paladin's power, had the paladin in the brig where he quietly listened to the minds of those aboard The Grim Ghost 2. Desiring to foster a sense of unity with the

Positive Commander, the captain begrudgingly relented when Nerli and Bicklesworth had argued over the paladin's fate.

During the argument over the paladin, Nerli argued that he should be in command, and Captain Atlas should be his guest with dignitary status.

The bosun had said, "Narr narr narr! Dignitary status on yer own ship, but this're another ship."

Nerli had pointed to the plaque above the ship's boardroom. It read: THE GRIM GHOST TOO. Nerli had said, "Too means also. This ship, 'tis still The Grim Ghost. She's The Grim Ghost *as well!*" He stopped short of calling the captain a usurper but said, "I should be in command."

At that time, the bosun stood with offense and said, "Narr, ya mermaiden's bastard tuna fish. 'Tis semantics is all, er a *tai-poe*. 'Tis The Grim Ghost 2 we's aboard. Bo! Hurr! 'Ow can two ships be one?"

Nerli had said, "If it's The Grim Ghost 2, then why's it spelled out with letters? Riddle me that, Mr. Bosun!"

The captain was privy to the exchange at the time and had no intention to make enemies of the crew from The Grim Ghost over a point of grammar, so he relented in the broader context. The paladin was sent to the brig where he sat for two days. Captain Atlas chalked up Nerli's comments to a moment of anger alone, but truly the captain knew better. Truly, the captain had the impending return to land on his mind.

When it was time to form the shore party, Bicklesworth said, "Reckon this fella Zorolo's the only one who has any idea what's going on out thurr."

The captain said to Nerli, "Any objections?"

Nerli said, "Ye can take 'im off me ship, but don't bring him back."

The bosun was apoplectic. He said, "Garrt!!! The law's the law, ya piss poor porpoise! He's a Guild Knight of the Fifth Degree!"

The captain, bigger than both of them and higher ranking



too, stood between the two big men. He said, "See about making the launches ready, would you, Mr. Bicklesworth?" Then he said more quietly, "Listen here, you Positive fish fillet. I'm the captain. I'll have whomever on *my* ship, whenever. Ya unnerstannat?" Before Nerli could even begin his platitude, the captain said, "And I've half a mind to have a court martial right here if you don't tighten up with yer nonsense."

Nerli said, "I—"

The captain barked, "Dismissed, Commander."

When Captain Atlas asked for volunteers, there were none from The Grim Ghost, and every sailor from The Sea Star raised their hand. Mr. Black was fully enthused, but the captain privately asked him to keep an eye on Commander Nerli who had accepted Mr. Black as his sailing master even when he didn't accept the captain as his captain. Several of the Ascendant raised their hands. The rest wanted to get on with the ascendancy that waited in Exland. It was not cowardice. It was merely that they believed their destinies led elsewhere.

The captain told Nerli, and when he told him he was really telling Mr. Black, that they should wait not less than one year, and then, if no word came, they should set sail for Exland with the remaining Ascendant. The captain refused most of his former crew. He didn't want to foster a mutiny with naught but Positive Fleet sailors aboard his Negative Fleet ship.

In the end, Captain Atlas refused all of the Ascendant as well. He said, "If them that's out there is what's naggin' the compass, then I'd be a fool to mix it up worse than it already is."

On advice from the bosun, the captain took Jim Bobson with them. Beyond the paladin, they also brought Able Seamen Gronk, Guido, Sergei, and Nkromo, and Petty Officer Demasi. When they were rowing away from the mother ship, Ishikawa jumped into the water and swam after them.

He said, "My destiny is out there. I am certain." When none of the others followed suit, the captain accepted the samurai into his company. The captain knew from his viewing that

Ishikawa was a great and wise warrior.

The captain was the first to jump into the surf and wade up the beach with the big wheel on his back once again. He didn't trust Nerli at all, and there was a chance yet that they might find a shipwright.

# 31

ABOUT ten thousand years after the prisoner excavated Draghor but then returned to Emerald Station, he was waiting at the rally point outside New Snoutistan. He was beyond the outskirts of a city on what had once been known as No Man's Plain. Berserkevich led a reconnaissance party into New Snoutistan the moon before, and by then the next moon was two days gone already. Berserkevich was two days late, so the prisoner waited in patient desperation all the way until the following moon came and went. Then he left the rally point. He made a stone marker so that Berserkevich or his people might have an idea of the prisoner's whereabouts: the whereabouts of him who was known to them as Super G.

Draghor felt the prisoner's desperation during the wait. The prisoner's mating program had found a lot of success breeding the worms out of the pigs he found on the plain. When Berserkevich's great-great—seven greats in all—grandfather died, the prisoner looked inside his skull and found not one worm. Worms remained in the gut of the Berserkevich line, but the male line seemed immune to worms of the brain. Looking only remotely porcine, the Berserkevich men could have passed for merely ugly humans, though they were beastly large, and strong. The Berserkevich disposition were warm, and there was kindness in them, so the prisoner considered them

human. All the male descendants of that first Berserkevich bore his name.

A series of unfortunate events led Super G north shortly before GFB based in New Snoutistan started a new campaign of war east onto the Great Plains. While he was in the north researching rumors of the Dark Lord, the GFB plundered the plains. When Super G returned, Berserkevich was the last of the Berserkevich line, so Super G was sorely hurt to leave the rally point without his friend. Draghor felt his pain. He loved Berserkevich too. Berserkevich had eleven daughters but as yet no son.

Draghor said, "Where to?"

Super G said, "To the coast."

"To Berserk Hold?"

Laying along the hammock hung inside the skeletal dragon's ribs, Super G said, "Yep." He lay and listened to the birds of the plain that still chirped and sang. He lay and listened to the buzzing bugs that still made uncorrupted sounds. Closer to the Great Basin, it would be nothing but oinking and squealing, and sick croaking calls. He liked the peaceful sounds and knew the oinks would bite him as he tried not to imagine the fate befallen the last of the Berserkevich men.

Super G remembered a time when the coast was months from New Snoutistan. Most recently with Berserkevich, crossing had taken only three weeks. He made the trip back with Draghor in four days. Super G took it as an ill omen, and it was, but really it was the last whip of the time tail of the dereality wave finally dissipating. Reality has a tendency to attenuate dereality on long timescales.

The prisoner was in a dreamlike state as Draghor carried him through the jungle. When Draghor climbed the final ridge before the long cliff above the slopes and smaller cliffs down to the line of seraphim, the prisoner was sorely worried. Berserkevich was gone, and it seemed that he was losing his mind as well. *Was it only four days? Is my memory wrong?*

Draghor answered him. "It was four days, and I don't think

so because I share those memories with you, G.”

*Is your memory wrong? Maybe we're both going crazy, ay?*

Draghor laughed dragon laughter.

The prisoner climbed out of the dragon's ribs and surveyed the land below. At the bottom of the cliff whose bottom was still far above the seraphim, the old trail was gone or overgrown. Draghor was a shinobi master and could move effortlessly through thick jungle with hardly a sound, but the prisoner had always maintained a trail up the coastal wall for his people in Berserk Hold. The coastal mountains were essentially insurmountable without it. Long before, Super G had falsified the GFB's maps so that they never came to the terrain which Super G then surveyed with his dragon companion. A dragon skeleton with a skeleton rider, they were an astounding sight.

Super G was further sickened when he thought about the GFB overrunning Berserk Hold. So much would be lost. Then he saw The Grim Ghost 2, just a lightly textured speck out at sea. Super G said, “Look!”

Draghor said nothing.

Super G said, “Is that a ship?” In all the millennia that spanned his memory, he had never seen any such thing in the sea beyond the seraphim.

The dragon asked, “What do you want to do?” The highest octave of Draghor's many-toned and magically basal voice was only just within the lowest range of human hearing.

Super G said, “Forget the trail, ay. Let's get down there.” He pulled himself back into the dragon's ribs and held his hammock tight for a wild ride. Draghor plunged over the rocky ledge. Even with Super G's many tons inside (Super G was at that time ten feet tall and mostly made of gold), Draghor drove down the cliff like a feline mountain goat. The dragon's claws dug into the steep rock face crushing any purchase on soft rock so that he gripped the mountain itself. In a moment, the dragon was surfing on a rock slide, and a moment later they were crashing through the old growth rain forest.

As far as Super G could tell, Draghor's bones were indestructible. At the bottom of the cliff, the dragon braked by crashing longways into the tree line. Several old men of the jungle, hundreds of feet tall, toppled and tumbled before the undead duo came to a halt. In the jungle, Draghor climbed down more gently, and Super G scanned the canopy from his mobile command center hoping for a peak at the ship. The canopy was thick, and he did not see the ship again until they were near the beach.

While Draghor's bones were pristine, Super G studied his own hands and wondered about the patina on them. Would he eventually turn to dust? The patina seemed the same as it always had, but then another dreadful thought clung to him. *Will the Dark Lord turn to dust?* He looked at Draghor's bones and their lack of patina. He found solace in the dragon's perfection. Even as the dragon crunched rock with his massive paws, the pearlescent claws and bones did not gain the slightest scratch or nick. As Draghor crept through the jungle like a serpentine ninja hardly louder than the wind in the leaves, Super G said, "You're a tough old stud, Draghor."

At the bottom of the mountains, Draghor brought them across the narrow band of flat but overgrown terrain on the coastal range's foot. When they approached the sea, they saw the ship and the captain's skiff coming toward the shore before the seraphim. Super G said, "Let's hang back." The seafarers were also a source of solace in his sorrowful state. Pigs were not known to Super G as being nautically inclined.

Gripping four gargantuan trees with four sets of four gargantuan claws, Draghor held his position a hundred yards from the exposed beach sands, and twenty yards off the jungle floor. As the captain's skiff neared the shore just beyond the western edge of the Great Basin, Super G made an entry in his log book. When he was done, he examined the log and found that it corroborated his memory. Something was amiss that they should cross from New Snoutistan to the coast in only four days. Super G retrieved another log book from the cargo

strung inside the cavity of the long dragon's serpentine form. He described the ship and the skiff and made notes on his thoughts.

He said to Draghor, "What if it goes the other way?"

"You mean, 'What if next time it takes a thousand years?'"

"Exactly."

"That would be a problem for the selective breeding, ay?"

Super G said, "Exactly," again as he jotted his thoughts. He looked up. The skiff was near enough that he could make out four men rowing, another five men, and one man standing proudly at the bow, leaning forward on his knee. The prisoner and the dragon watched closely as the longboat rode up the shore and jarred to a stop. The man in front jumped into the surf and waded up the beach. The others did too, and then the rowers pulled their craft further out of the water.

The captain scooped a handful of beach sand and examined it closely. He said, "Shells."

Bicklesworth also examined his own handful of sand and concurred. "Hurr! Bo! These ain't the same shapey knobbers as back where we were."

Jim Bobson stated the obvious: "And these statues are certainly different." The material was jade, and the artisanal signature on the craftsmanship was slightly oriental where the theme of the seraphim in their shared memory was more gothic. Jim Bobson took a small sample of the beach sand with a few small shells and shell fragments. He poured it into a small vial, capped it, and stuck it in the utility belt around his waist. The Grim Ghost 2 was fully stocked, and he carried a science officer's field kit.

The captain sent the five junior enlisted sailors to look for the cobbled road that led to Braido Goran's place. They didn't find it, and although Gronk walked directly in front of Super G and his dragon, he did not see them and kept walking. By mid-afternoon, the party regrouped at the skiff. The captain held little hope in light of the changed seraphim.

The captain told the others, "This is what it is. We can start

walking or we can go back to the ship.” He paused. “I don’t know if you know,” he said to Ishikawa who was with Mr. Black and that party while the captain’s party was inland, “but after we walked all the way back, then we walked by one more of these things,” he threw his thumb back over his shoulder toward the giant jade winged woman, “and then the road were right there. So, what I’m saying is that the road was really right there where we landed and it was only that we walked the wrong way down the beach. Now, there’s no way to know if that was a fluke, I think it wasn’t, or if there’s not another in-road for a million miles, or even if this is the same beach at all. When the storm came upon us, I thought I steered ‘er true but now I’m not so sure.”

The bosun said, “Barr! So we can start walkin’ or we can go back to the ship and start sailin’, and whichever one we choose, we won’t know where we’re going.”

Jim Bobson added, “Or how long it will take to get there, which is the operative item in my analysis.”

The captain and the bosun both said, “Aye.”

The brave seamen and the samurai waited for the captain’s orders. The paladin wondered about the man and the dragon hiding in the jungle.

The captain said, “So my sense is—”

The baritone brutality of Draghor’s laugh shook their bones. Super G and his dragon dropped to the jungle floor and bounded boldly onto the beach through a tornado of broken branches and crunching wood. Draghor emerged from the jungle directly inland from where the men sat in council, circled around the captain’s wheel. With feline precision, Draghor leaped through the air, far over their heads, and landed in the sea where he whipped around and closed on them with deliberate plodding steps.

Super G rose onto the dragon’s back and climbed its neck to man the minigun mounted on Draghor’s head. Just as the outlanders began to make haste, Super G ripped the cord on the small combustion engine that powered his machine gun,



and it roared to life like a lawnmower. Draghor read Super G's intention and commanded, "Halt!" as Super G strafed the beach with lead. Indigo blaze showed where Super G's golden bones came together, and a subtle but fiery green ambiance was upon his dragon.

The outlanders halted.

Super G said, "Who goes there?" Super G's voice, aged ten thousand years and giant-sized, was same as the prisoner's voice when they left him on the beach less than one week earlier.

The bosun said, "Bonesy? Is that Bonesy up there?"

Super G heard the bosun's voice and paused for the déjà vu. He saw the captain's bicorne cover with its opulent gold trim. He saw the wide wooden wheel set in the sand. Super G's mind reeled as he tried to remember something from a long time ago. Something from near the beginning.

The captain said, "Is that you, Bonesy?"

It clicked, or part of it did. Super G said, "The Sea Star?" The furious thunder was gone from his voice. Only the sound of strength remained.

The dragon knew his own memory as well. He was in the void with the prisoner for a long time. Draghor asked his own question as the prisoner asked his. "The Sea Star?"

The captain said, "Aye!"

Petty Officer Demasi and Able Seaman Nkromo, both from The Sea Star, were relieved. Ishikawa stood calmly and knew he was correct to abandon ship. Jim Bobson didn't know what to make of it.

The bosun rhymed, "Yarr dee! Hardy harr, ye oldie Sea Star. That were our ship! Shipshape-aroo!"

Super G said, "Bicklesworth." He hesitated to say it as the memory of Rosalie ruminated somewhere in the back of his mind, far from the surface.

Draghor said, "G. He has it," and turned his head so the gas-powered Gatling gun pointed to the bosun.

Super G leaped down from Draghor's head. His bony feet,

disproportionately large in giant form, plunged three feet into the sand under his metal weight. The sounds of the jungle and the sky remained, but to Super G they fell away. To him, the sky went dark. He waded forward kicking aside literal tons of sand as he plodded forth. The tide withdrew, and no new waves came.

Super G's voice was the loudest thing any of them ever heard, louder than the dragon and louder even than lightning's thunder. On the line to the bosun, he said, "Do you have the Amulark of Zarganthos?!" The sound of Super G knocked most of them on their butts. Ishikawa was in the rear, stoic, standing with the paladin.

The bosun, then seated, said, "Aye, yarr. Course I do."

Louder still, Super G marched on the bosun in his moment of truth and triumph. *The time is at hand!* "Give!!!" He pounded forward and smashed his forward foot deep into the beach with another step. "It!!!" Gronk covered his ears. Nearing the seated men, the prisoner kicked another ton of sand to the side with the heave of his hip. "To!!!" The prisoner stopped a few feet from them where he loomed like death. He extended his golden arm and held open his hand. Super G said, "Me!!!"

At that time, it was clear to the captain and the bosun that, indeed, of all their Ascendant charges left ashore, the prisoner was the one they were looking for. No need to go all the way to Far Shores to get the verdict. There he was: the kernel of truth, in the flesh, as it were. The bosun unbuttoned his crisp blue and cream-colored tunic. He drew a small knife and felt the line on the right side between his massively muscular major and minor pectoral muscles. He felt the chain and made a small incision. With the tip of the knife he fished out a small chain from just under his skin. He pulled it out covered in blood, but he did not bleed much when his finger pressed on the wound. On a thin loop of chain made from platinum and palladium, the bosun produced the Amulark of Zarganthos. He looped it on Super G's finger.

The glow from between Super G's bones went null. He

clasped the chain and did a quadruple back flip high in the air to remount his dragon. The dragon's glow ceased as well when the sea washed back up the beach from wherever it had gone.

The paladin took careful note of the amulark, and also of the bosun. Zorolo da Vinci, too, sought the Amulark of Zarganthos.

Super G flicked the lid off the small amulark strung on the chain. The paradox inside swirled and did not swirl. The sunshine returned to the prisoner's perspective. Then he faced the sun and sprinkled the contents of the Amulark of Zarganthos over his head. Nothing happened.

A few seconds, then five, and then a new field enveloped the giant and the dragon. A sharp surface of power shone over their unified aural field. Parallel bands of colored power washed over them. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet, and a bright band like the light of a black light undulated over them from the dragon's tip to tail. The waves of color increased in frequency as each band reached the tail to reappear at the nose. The undulating oscillations sped until a brilliant flash of white blotted out even the sun. There the giant and his dragon stood before the ten brave souls ashore, bathed in stationary bands of iridescent rainbow colors.

After the flash, Jim Bobson remarked dutifully, "Captain, I am reading power level spikes above nine thousand."

Draghor reared up on his hind legs like a lion rampant. Magical wing webbing appeared in the space between Draghor's myriad wing bones. The dragon flapped his wings and took flight. They rose in the sky even above the peaks of the coastal range and surveyed the Great Basin from on high. The prisoner scanned for the Great Cities but could not see them. Then he thought of Rosalie. He remembered her. He turned his attention to the sea. Draghor dove on *The Grim Ghost 2* like a dive bomber only to veer to port a single moment before calamity.

Super G and Draghor set down once again in front of the shore party. The new colors remained, but the intensity of

their combined fire aura was normalized to how it was before. Draghor's green glow had become many-colored.

Bicklesworth said, "Take 'er easy thurr now, Bonesy."

Super G said, "Call me Super G." Thousands of years after Super G first read the *Ballad of Zarganthos*, he had the amulark at last. *The Dark Lord is doomed! It is certain!*

The bosun said, "No problem, Super G."

Super G scanned the several faces. He said, "Bosun Bicklesworth."

The bosun nodded.

Super G said, "Ishikawa."

The samurai said, "Hi!" and bowed a little.

Super G said, "Captain Atlas."

The captain said, "We were hoping we'd find you here."

Super G looked at the other men. "Nkromo."

Nkromo said, "Yessir."

Super G said, "Demasi."

Demasi said, "Super G."

He looked at the men he did not recognize. Then he looked at Jim Bobson. He said, "Jarrow?"

Jim Bobson said, "I'm Jim Bobson actually, but I don't blame you. The likeness and all." He showcased his black body suit and purple, many-pocketed utility belt suspenders to the dragon-mounted golden giant encased in a rainbow behind the still roaring Gatling gun.

Super G felt suddenly at ease. He said, "Jim Bobson, ay? Nice to meet you." He looked at the other sailors and the paladin. He said, "I don't recognize you there."

"Guido."

"Sergei."

"I'm Gro— I'm Gronk, Super G. Pleasure."

Super G said, "Hello." Then he said to the paladin, "Who are you?"

Lord Zorolo da Vinci said, "You can call me Des."

Super G fell into a moment of introspection. In the paladin, he recognized the first voice, the one he heard when he finally

emerged from the void. He said, “You were on the beach that day,” though he couldn’t quite recall which day he was thinking about.

The paladin said, “I was. I sensed your bones in the sand, and we dug you up. You were not so large then, my friend.”

Super G said, “Where is Rosalie?” His memory had not yet fully returned, and there were some serious, salient points of interest that had not yet occurred to him.

The captain said, “She’s out there somewhere,” and he motioned toward the inland jungle.

Super G said, “Twelve?”

The captain said, “He’s out there,” and pointed to his new ship.

Super G remembered the day long ago when he emerged from the sand. He remembered the tip of Draghor’s claw between his shin bones. Then he said to the captain, still not fully recalling, “Maybe I should have gone with you.”

The captain said, “With us?”

“Maybe I should have gone back to the ship with you.”

“To Exland? We never got there. We were wrecked again straight away.”

The bosun said, “Yarr, and we might all be dead if it weren’t for ol’ Squiddy here.”

Super G didn’t understand, but he knew the bosun meant Des. His mind roiled with memories of millennia long forgot.

The captain asked Super G to come aboard The Grim Ghost 2 with them. The prisoner explained that he missed a meeting with his friend, a most important meeting, and that he was going to check on the family. Super G said, “Depending on what’s at Berserk Hold, ay.” Then he said, “And I’ve got a score to settle out on the plains anyway.” Super G invited them to come with him, and they accepted. The giant helped the men onto the broad net strung inside the dragon. He said, “Hold tight,” and then to his dragon, “Make haste, Draghor.”

Draghor said, “Shall we fly then?”

Super G considered it, but then he declined. He didn’t want

to introduce another unexpected surprise at Berserk Hold beyond his new outland friends.

Draghor said, “Sounds good,” and began a canter down the beach toward the cleft in the mountains and the place called Berserk Hold.

On the way, the prisoner’s remorse kicked in. He remembered the dungeon. He remembered the long suffering and terror. He remembered that Rosalie ground his bones on the grinding stone and poured his grits into the volcano.

# 32

WHEN the prisoner opened the Amulark of Zarganthos and made its power his own, the region near the jade seraphim broke off from the unreal realm and became a planet inside a galaxy in the universe. When the white flash came following the prisoner's powered-up rainbow crescendo, the flash was not a part of that power. It was the flash of the production of a new planet.

When Draghor won his wings' webbing and flew, he disturbed the subtle air currents. A few jets and eddies of air changed destinations from where they would have gone. Shortly after the dragon began the quick final trip to Berserk Hold, a flutterby in the jungle flew north instead of south. If it had flown to the south, that flutterby would have populated the planet with the eggs it would soon lay beneath the broad leaf of a jungle succulent. As it was, the residual eddies from the flap of Draghor's wings encouraged the flutterby to fly in the other direction. The beach cleaved off from the mystical realm, or a section of the beach rather, the beach beyond the universe remaining as infinitely long and mystical as ever. Physics followed the flutterby on its flight to the north because its decision to fly that way was caused by the creation of a physical planet.

On the day following the day after the flutterby laid its eggs,

the wind from the sea to the shore died down, and there was a stillness in the jungle which it had never known. Leaves did not rustle. Branches did not softly sway. Clouds seemed to stop in the sky and then reverse as the wind blew from the land toward the sea. The reversal of pressures swept across the Great Basin until the prevailing winds were westerly. Ruby Town was shielded from the winds by the wild wizard's energy shield, and so the wizard did not notice the breezy change on a cloudless city day. The wizard watched the weather vane, day in and day out, and it too did not move because the osmotic properties of the force field allowed only molecular exchange, while it denied the net momentum of the winds that were upon it.

However, shortly after the winds shifted, the weather vane did creak to the astonishment of the Ruby Town wizard. He pulled the walkie-talkie from his robes and reported the creak he heard, and the almost imperceptible change in direction. Seconds later, it creaked again. Then the weather vane creaked again. The creak became a squeak, and the squeaky weather vane turned full around so that it pointed to the Ruby Town wizard himself, or rather to the man playing the part at that time.

The weather vane was based on quantum compass technology, and it gave the sign the wizard was waiting for. He fixed his staff in a notch on the flat platform atop the Ruby Fortress' highest spire. Then he cast off the old robe revealing military fatigues beneath. The wizard untied the fake beard that covered most of his face and left it behind as he dove down the stairs that wound around down into the halls of the Ruby Fortress.



# 33

“HERE we are,” said Super G.

The others did not notice at first the appearance of the narrow canyon disguised as it was among the angled planes of the coastal mountains’ cliffs and slopes. At the stream, Draghor turned from the beach and strode up the canyon where the trail of cleared trees was not in a high state of maintenance but was maintained to some degree and not overgrown like the other inland trail. Super G wondered about the state of the third inland trail further down the beach but was eager to get to Berserk Hold.

After about a mile, the canyon opened to a valley, and there were grassy hillside meadows not grown over with jungle: Berserk Hold, Super G’s meadow oasis. The soft and bright greens of the grassy knolls contrasted greatly with the much darker, lush green of the mountainsides all around. Another mile up the valley, in plain sight from where the canyon first opened, the men got their first look at Berserk Hold proper. Built next to the trickle of a narrow waterfall, the black basalt castle climbed from the meadow. Its foundations set in the meadow encroached on the hillside, even beyond the edge of the jungle. The Hold’s upper reaches looked down on the lowest reaches of the jungle canopy before it gave way to the softer meadow. Behind about three square miles of softly rolling hilly

meadow, the castle's structure was of standing stone cylinders in various sizes, melded together in architectural splendor. Some were tall right cylinders, but the main components of the structure were squat and teardrop-shaped. The round sweep of the biggest, closest, and tallest of Berserk Hold's many cylindrical segments projected four black basalt buttresses which scored the meadow like dragon's claws. Once home to a thriving community of the descendants of the first Berserkevich, the meadow was free from frolicking children. There was not a soul to be seen, and not a soulless pig either.

Super G said, "Hopefully they're just inside." He thought he might find a haunted house long abandoned. He said to Draghor, "Go ahead then, old friend."

Draghor announced their arrival with a piercing roar as he traipsed up the final stretch of land ending at the empty moat. The drawbridge was burned, and ladders were laid where one could climb down into the moat from the castle's main entrance and then up again onto the meadowland.

Plumchiss Berserkevich, the Lady Zaftig, appeared among the crenellations high above and said through a brass sound horn, "Weren't expecting to see you 'gain 'round here!"

Super G told the others, "Hold tight," and dropped from his dragon. He waved to the woman. Before he addressed the woman on the high wall, he said to his fellows, "I know you've had some experiences, but, please, have patience, ay. These pigs are ok." He was wrong about that. He sensed something amiss but couldn't put his finger on it. He wrote it off as acclimatization to his newly gathered Zarganthean powers. Super G said, "Hello, woman!"

The Lady Zaftig said, "Where've you been?"

"I was near New Snoutistan. Is Berserkevich here?"

She said, "What were you doin' in Snoutistan?"

Super G thought it was an odd question. He assumed he was speaking to Rungah, but he focused on her and couldn't be sure. She looked older, but different. He said, "Why don't you invite us in and we'll talk, ay?"

She hollered down from the high wall, “Alright. Meet me in the east’rd dining room.”

Super G said, “It’s good to see you, I was worried,” but she was already gone and did not reply. Super G invited his new company to follow him. He jumped over the moat and into the gap where still stood a few charred timbers of the draw bridge he had built with his own hands. The other nine men climbed down into the moat where the same soft meadow grass grew and then climbed up behind him. The captain left his old ironwood wheel like a one-piece cairn in the grass before the castle.

The castle was not in an orderly state. The state of disrepair was too much considering Super G’s perception of the months he’d been away. Plumchiss sat at the head of the banquet table in the dim room. No torches burned, and light only fell in through two high, narrow shafts. Berserk Hold was wired for electricity when the prisoner last left it, but there had never been electric lights in the eastward dining room. Plumchiss told them that Berserkevich had returned from New Snoutistan almost thirty years ago. What she heard from Berserkevich was that Super G never made it to the rally point. She introduced herself as Rungah’s eldest daughter Rungita, though she was really Rungah’s fifth daughter Plumchiss.

It wasn’t hard for Super G to grasp that he’d lost thirty years. He’d lost thousands with the men behind him. Super G could believe that she was Rungita who he had known as a youngster. He had known Plumchiss, too, and thought she was a bad apple, but he did not recognize her. That piglet was nothing but the memory of a silly girl in his mind, and he did not question the sow. He said, “So you’re the Lady Zaftig since Rungah’s passing, ay?”

The Lady Zaftig said, “I am.”

“You were just a girl at the time, but could you tell me if you remember: did Berserkevich bring back the software from New Snoutistan?”

“What’s software?”

“Let me rephrase, ay. When Berserkevich came back, did it seem like he found what he went looking for?”

“Oh! Yeah, he thought he did. You mean with that thing up in the mountains?”

Super G knew she meant the SS7-11 Ruby Town Replicator™ hidden a cave further up the valley. In times past, Super G had obtained a fraudulent service contract through which he could obtain black market replacement parts for the replicator that he did not have to begin with. Over time, he built a complete machine. Berserkevich’s mission in New Snoutistan had been to meet a dissident in contact with the Ruby Town Resisters’ Front who had a copy of the software that would run the machine. Super G said, “That’s the one. What do you mean, ‘He thought he did?’”

In the dark hall, the Lady Zaftig thought back to her own childhood around the time Berserkevich returned having lost his golden companion. She said, “He said he had it. For months— I was just a girl at the time. For months, he was up there every day. Never got it working. After that he went lookin’ for you ,and we never saw him again.”

“How many live here now?” There were hundreds when Super G last left.

“About twice firteen.”

“So Berserkevich did come back with the disc then? The silver circly thing?”

Plumchiss said, “He did, I remember it. He, *oink*, wouldn’t let anyone touch it. Said we’d mess it up.”

“And where is the disc now?”

“I have no idea. He brought it up there straight away and I never saw it again.”

“You never went looking for it?”

She laughed and said, “Why would I? That damn good for nothing machine didn’t do nothing for us no way.” Then she added, “And hiking up that trail don’t quite take my fancy, if’ns ya take my meaning.”

Super G said that he had to go to the cave right away. In

the dark room, Plumchiss couldn't quite see with her poor pig vision that Super G's companions were monkeys. He told and assured her that even though they were monkeys, they were ok and that they were with him, and that she should welcome them as honored guests. Plumchiss agreed and Super G whispered something similar to the men from *The Grim Ghost 2* as he left. "Be patient. Don't start any trouble. If you see something, just smile and be pleasant. I'll be back in a few hours, max."

When Super G left, Plumchiss said, "It's so dark in here! Why don't you come up to the kitchen with me and I'll make you some sandwiches?" The captain accepted on behalf of them all. They followed her up to a kitchen and dining room combo on the castle's fifth floor. Next to the kitchen island was a long table where four young pigs sat. Two boys and two girls, the four were severely afflicted with brain worms. Plumchiss herself was quite porcine but still maintained an air of comely womanliness not unlike Miss Piggy. She wore a cream-colored blouse with the top four buttons undone. A ribbon fastened a green dirndl which was very flattering to her three sets of increasingly large breasts. Her outfit was slightly Bavarian, and it reminded Ishikawa, who was not familiar with Bavaria in any way, shape, or form, of the dress worn by the waitress at Barney's.

The ribbon crossed between each row of the lady's six pink breasts and pushed her three cleavages high, much to the pleasure of a few, and very much to the pleasure of Able Seaman Gronk. Gronk could hardly look away. In the fluorescent electric light, he noticed through the fancy pleats of the lady's dress that her thighs were like heaven, and her buttocks Butterball turkeys. The skin on her cheeks was smooth and pink, not warty and hairy like Gronk's conception of the Eternal Enemy's children. Her cheeks were hardly jowls at all. Gronk licked his lips.

Plumchiss caught Gronk staring at her. She blushed and said, "Oh my!"

Jim Bobson said, "Are these your children, ma'am?"

She said, "Those two are," and pointed to the two boys. Their father Rowbot was brought to Berserk Hold by Super G himself for the breeding program, but Rowbot's results had not been particularly positive.

"And who are these fine young ladies?"

The girls giggled and smiled and clung to each other.

Jim Bobson said, "I'm Jim Bobson."

Plumchiss said, "Nice to meet you, Jim Bobson."

The other men introduced themselves to the Lady Zaftig who then said, "Well? Aren't you going to introduce yourselves?"

The elder girl said, "I'm Purleypue." Among Berserkevich's many daughters, his granddaughter Purleypue was the only descendant not perished at Berserk Hold.

The men said hello to her.

The elder boy said, "I'm Ronjerimo."

The men said hello to him. Jim Bobson said, "That's a fine name, Ronjerimo. I like it."

The other, cross-eyed girl said, "I'm Hussy."

The men said hello to her.

The younger boy said, "I'm Shmorbo." When Jim Bobson did not compliment his name, he said, "You know? Like, *oink*, Kevin Shmorbo? From Shmercules? You know that show? Shmercules?"

Plumchiss stopped what she was doing and looked anxiously over her shoulder. She said, "Oh my!" and started to sweat.

Jim Bobson said, "That's a good name too, Shmorbo."

The bosun said, "Aye, 'tis a fine name, Shmorbo. Good job."

Shmorbo said, "Yeah, I got it because my mom thinks Kevin Shmorbo is hot."

Plumchiss said, "Oh my!" and fanned herself with her hand.

# 34

THE prisoner unstacked the stones set in place three decades prior. They blocked the entrance to the cave other than a small gap in the lower concourse where the power cable ran down to Berserk Hold. He worked deliberately, not too fast, and wondered what he would find inside. When he could enter the cave, he did. He pulled the chain on the single halogen bulb which clicked on for a moment but buzzed and burned out straight away. Super G could see in the dark, so he did not fetch a replacement from the closet which, at one time at least, held many replacements. He could hear the hum of the SXA-762 Ruby Town Fusion Reactor™ from the back of the cave which was much larger than its entrance on the mountainside might indicate. Designed for a millennium of uninterrupted service, Super G was glad the reactor still ran.

Super G sat at the replicator console which was only a monitor, a keyboard, and a mouse on a desk. With bated breath, he pushed the power button on the monitor, and the small green light popped to life. The empty light of the blank screen cast frightful shadows on Super G's gruesome skull. Then nothing happened. The screen was blank. Super G's heart sunk, but then it occurred to him to check the replicator's server tray. He flicked the flat, fat red switch, and it clicked from O to I. No sound came from the solid-state drives, but

the power light on the panel blinked for several seconds and then became solid. Across the cave, Super G saw the boot sequence flashing line by line on the monitor. He sat once again on the boulder before the haphazard desk.

Line by line, the replication software loaded. At each line, a dot became an ellipsis which sprouted a fountain of further dots onto a red box which read **LOADING**. Each red box became a green box filled with two black letters: **OK**. Each green box was a sigh of relief. In the prisoner's state of discontent, each red box turning green was more than a sigh. It was like an entire victory abroad and homecoming parade for a war well fought. For about five minutes, Super G sat in nervous, nail-biting tension. Then the monitor told him: **Boot sequence complete**. He became prematurely happy when he expected the desktop environment to load, but it did not load. Instead, the monitor cleared and gave him a meager prompt cast in green letters against the black background.

**\$\$-SupG\_Bzrk/home>**

Super G cringed. The training module that he'd practiced in with Berserkevich loaded directly to the desktop. Super G was sick at the stupidity of it. He typed six letters.

**\$\$-SupG\_Bzrk/home> startx**

The desktop loaded. The speakers in the monitor chimed a short diddy and told him, "Ruby Town!" Super G never taught Berserkevich the command prompt. It seemed irrelevant because the replicator ran in the desktop environment. It never occurred to him that the technician in New Snoutistan might have disabled the default boot-to-desktop functionality.

Super G imagined Berserkevich arriving at Berserk Hold alone. He imagined him climbing to the cave anyway telling himself that he had the software and that everything would be ok. He imagined Berserkevich watching each red boot box turn green with growing excitement until it all fell apart and loaded the command prompt instead of the desktop. He imagined Berserkevich doing it over and over, disconnecting everything and reconnecting it, industriously searching for the



desktop application that Super G had taught him so well. The small laptop with the SS7-11 Ruby Town Replicator™ demo software (v3.0.2) was folded shut on top of the main server tray.

Super G opened the desktop application in the authentic software and told the replicator to replicate an apple. The monstrous machinery stacked against the far wall whirred as the agitators in the material basins stirred ingredients for the first time. A sound like an egg timer dinged and Super G retrieved the Red Delicious apple. He studied it and squeezed it. The firm apple flesh gave way under the push of his bones. He crushed the apple in his fist and smelled the aroma of the juices that dripped and splattered on the makeshift level wooden floor in the cave. The sweetness of the smell was bittersweet as he stood on the spot where the soul ripping frustration had afflicted his friend and ally Berserkevich.

# 35

BY the time Berserkevich made it back to Berserk Hold, the stumps of his arms were gangrenous. He lost one above the elbow on egress from New Snoutistan and put the zip tie tourniquet on it with his other hand. When the GFB attacked him at the rally point where he waited for Super G, his other hand was blown off. With his teeth, he put the tourniquet on in the jungle. Of the twelve men on the mission, two went into New Snoutistan with him. They were both killed in the city. When Berserkevich got back to the rally point, the other nine men, pigs that he considered men like he considered himself a man, were nowhere to be found. Berserkevich assumed they were dead. Three were dead. Six were in irons, headed into the depths of the Jiganthemum Jibode.

Berserkevich couldn't believe they'd killed Super G. He was too strong. The legends of Super G's invincibility were from the time before the Dark Lord had sown technology on the plain, but Berserkevich believed them. The truth was, invincibility or no, every time Super G went to destroy New Snoutistan, the Slitherfish appeared and repelled him, or sent some new voodooed thing from the depths of hell that could do the same. Thrice Super G had harassed New Snoutistan, and thrice he'd woken on the rural plain with his memory fractured. He'd wake in terrible pain, but the pain always faded.

Like dust in the wind, the blaster scorch always came away from his golden bones.

While Berserkevich was on his final mission into GFB New Snoutistan, Super G was lost in the time wave. While Berserkevich waited at the rally point, the GFB tracked him down. Into the rainforests of the Foibled Mountains, Berserkevich narrowly escaped with his life. He knew the mountains like he had known the backs of his hands. Even where Berserkevich had never stepped before, he knew the jungle well.

After he eluded the GFB, Berserkevich nearly died in the jungle. He slogged on in a terrible state down the last stretch of beach where the familiar jade seraphim told him he was almost home. When he climbed the canyon and emerged into the meadow, he expected to see Draghor. It was crushing to him when he saw no such thing. Still, the chartreuse grass told him he was safe. In a final burst of energy, he jogged to the open draw bridge and rang the hanging bell by taking the hammer's rope in his teeth. Then he collapsed in exhaustion but knew everything would be ok. The small laser disc was safely in his pack, unblemished and pristine.

Berserkevich woke and did not immediately recall his missing limbs. When he tried to scratch his face, the maggots eating his dead flesh away got on his face, and he passed out again. When he woke, Rowbot and Narkina were in his chamber. They were already talking about killing him, but he didn't get the context of their words as he came to. Privately, they said it was only a matter of time until one of Super G's stupid missions led the GFB to Berserk Hold.

As Berserkevich woke, Narkina said, "Why do we even have, *oink*, two trails? There's naught but trouble making pointless war on New Snoutistan. Is it even war? Where's our army if it's a war?"

Rowbot agreed that they should only use the other trail further down the beach where they could trade with the pigs of plain. Further to the east on the Great Plains, the Dark Mage had not yet fully militarized. He said, "But if we kill him,"

those words struck deep in Berserkevich's psyche, and his mind began to stir, "then what will Super G do?"

Berserkevich's strongest allies, pigs Super G considered good fruits of his project at Berserk Hold, never returned from New Snoutistan. With Berserkevich back just a few days and the others possibly trailing behind, Rowbot said, "And what if Komodor and Barsefus show up tomorrow?" They were Berserkevich's half-brothers from another father, good pigs. "You think the others won't, *oink*, rat us out?"

Narkina said, "We could do it right now, who would—"

Berserkevich moaned, "Super G?" Berserkevich learned that neither Super G nor his brothers, nor the others that he called in his mind pigs of virtue, had returned. Berserkevich examined the maggots on his stumps and was glad the telltale red streaks of blood poisoning were not there. The maggots were good medicine.

When Berserkevich's fever broke, he called for his eldest daughter. He said when she arrived, "Mia, bag up these stumps for me, will ya?"

It was the first time she was allowed to see her father since his return. She cried, "Oh, Father! Father! Your arms, Father!" Mia did as she was told. Over the objections of Rowbot who was as close to a doctor as Berserk Hold had, she went with her father up to the cave where the machine was.

Super G knew the tensions and sedition in Berserk Hold had been growing. Even before heading to the city, none of them believed that the replicator would do what Super G promised. Everyone who believed had gone with him to New Snoutistan. Berserkevich was a believer, and he knew how important it was to demonstrate the technology if his closest allies were gone. On the hike up to the cave, Mia said, "Father! Your arms! You've given them for that damn skelly man and—"

Berserkevich was very weak, but his voice still boomed with anger. He said, "Mia! Don't call him that! We only exist in peace here because he protects us."

Mia said, “Yes, father,” but she could not hold her tongue. Nearer the cave, she said, “But he didn’t protect your hands, father! And your brothers? Where are they? Narkina is already saying that you as good as killed them.”

Berserkevich said nothing, the climb was taking everything. The big pig-man didn’t have blood poisoning, but his stumps were infected under those bagged beds of maggots. He was dehydrated, and his fever had only just broken.

Mia said, “And Bromo and Lyle? Shmike and Ardodle?”

Berserkevich huffed and panted as he said, “Be quiet, child. We’re almost there.” He knew she had a point. Managing the Hold without those men, all of whom he considered his brothers, would be hard until Super G came back. *He has to come back. Doesn’t he?*

Mia loaded the disk and powered on the electronics. Berserkevich watched the same crescendo of red boxes turning green that Super G would watch thirty years later. The crescendo came to the same anti-climax when the command prompt appeared instead of the desktop. Until late in the night, armless Berserkevich instructed his daughter to disconnect and reconnect every little thing, ten times over, and then ten times again, until the exhaustion took him. They slept in the cave. Upon waking, they descended to Berserk Hold.

The following day, Berserkevich went to the cave with a full pack of food and used his nose to push the power buttons. He used his teeth to plug in and unplug the replicator components in the server tray. His heart sank throughout the day, and it was ten thousand fathoms from contentment by the time exhaustion took him again in the afternoon. He slept in the cave until after nightfall and then stayed until morning. He called to heaven for the desktop to load, but it never did.

Rowbot warned him against climbing up and down the mountainside in his sorry state of unhealed limblessness, but Berserkevich couldn’t stand to be in the castle. Everyone, it seemed, was against him. One morning when he was packing food for the day, Berserkevich overheard Narkina saying,

“That stupid oaf and his golden god! We could be living perfectly fine lives in New Snoutistan if it wasn’t for their stupid, *oink-squee*, nonsense.”

Berserkevich hated to hear it, but his fever had returned. He didn’t have the energy to rebuke the woman. He rested for one day and then went to the cave for two more days. On the second evening, Berserkevich descended after another thousand fruitless repeats of the same simple task. He collapsed on the trail under the nightmarish fever. No one saw Berserkevich around the castle for another two days, and it was only on the third day that Mia organized her sisters to look for him. She said, “With Super G gone, we’re as good as dead if Narkina can get rid of Father too.”

Helga and Tootsie found their father in a sorry state on the trail. Berserkevich said, “I’m glad... found me.” His broken leg was twisted and already black. He was parched, and his words were a raspy whisper. “Water... Rowbot.”

The girls fetched Rowbot and the water. Rowbot came with four other pigs that brought big Berserkevich back to the castle. After that, Berserkevich became very ill. The trauma was too much, and he rested without wasting precious energy marching to the cave. During that time, Narkina relented in her machinations because she thought Berserkevich would die. He did not die. The maggots scoured the dead, blackened flesh from his arms, and Rowbot cleaned them away and replaced them with salve. When Berserkevich fell, he snapped his shin on a rock, and his leg was twisted so no blood could flow. Rowbot took the leg with a saw, and it did not become infected. Strong as he was, Berserkevich was marching up to the cave with a crutch five weeks later. On the high trail overlooking the lime-like greens of the meadow, Berserkevich searched the scenery expecting Super G and Draghor to appear at each moment. He was long dead by the time they did.

After losing his leg, Berserkevich asked one of his daughters to accompany him up the trail each day. He said, “Just to be safe, sweetie.” A daughter walked up with him each morning

and another walked down with him near sunset.

In the second month of Berserkevich's unproductive desperation as a triple amputee, Narkina seduced Tootsie. Narkina said in the kitchen, "Tootsie. That's such a lovely name."

Tootsie said, "*Oink*. Thanks."

Narkina said, "You know, *oink*, of all your father's daughters, I always thought you were the prettiest." Tootsie was the only one with hooves and back-bending knees. The moles on her snout were not as numerous as Narkina's, but Tootsie was a wretched-looking creature, and she was loved by her father just the same.

Tootsie blushed and smiled.

Narkina said, "Too bad your sisters are all ahead of you. What are you? Ninth?"

"Ninth. Yes, ma'am."

"What if, *oink*, I told you there was a way for you to be first?" Tootsie opened her ear, and Narkina poured poison.

Eventually, Berserkevich stopped going to the cave. There was nothing he could do other than load the same five minutes of the boot sequence over and over. He was crushed. He stayed in his chambers and lost all hope save one. His gaze did not stray far from the window where he expected to see Draghor emerge from the hidden canyon at every blink. During that time, his daughters brought three meals a day and tended to him as he became only the husk of the strong man they'd known. Then Tootsie brought him poisoned loaf, and he died in slow agony.

Rowbot had cooked the poison, and he told the Hold the lie that the blood poisoning had got the best of Berserkevich after all. The ignorant pigs didn't know any better and didn't dispute the diagnosis. When Berserkevich died, Narkina blamed everything on Super G. She rallied the remaining pigs of Berserk Hold against Berserkevich's mother Purlette who was the Lady Zaftig at that time. Narkina told lies about the joys of life in New Snoutistan. No one thought to ask how she

knew about the city having never left Berserk Hold. The Berserk pigs were less evil than the city pigs, but they were no smarter and often dumber. Most believed her when she recounted what came on the TV.

In an orgasm of discontent, Narkina, with Rowbot at her side, led the lynching of the Lady Zaftig and set herself up as the new Lady of the Hold. While Purlette's body still smoldered, Narkina's vitriol against Super G and Berserkevich burned in the ears of the other pigs. Narkina cast dispersions on Berserkevich's remaining daughters. "Look, *rrroink*, at them! *Squeee!* They are disgusting! *Rrroink!* Their feet, *oink*, are like hands! Their knees, *schmaub*, are like elbows!" On and on, Narkina spoke hate against the Berserkevich girls that cowered far from the embers of their grandmother.

Irkody said, "Burn them!"

Derdie said, "Do we want to be monkeys?"

The mania caught on, and all of Berserkevich's daughters were burned that night. All except Tootsie who was saved by her severe deformities and treachery.

Berserk Hold was a shambles in the aftermath. Tootsie knew she'd done wrong, and there were others who knew that what they did wasn't right. A battle broke out in the castle with brothers killing brothers and children killing parents. In the end, the pigs that remained were loyal to Narkina.

Rowbot encouraged Narkina to get rid of Tootsie too, but Narkina secretly knew that Berserkevich had been the best of them. She did not want to erase his line altogether; she wanted to make his line hers. So, Narkina sent Rowbot to rape Tootsie. When the litter was born and weaned, Tootsie disappeared and was never seen again. The litter was the healthiest litter born in Berserk Hold in a long time. With only one harshly deformed piglet in the bunch, it was the healthiest litter ever born to Rowbot. Purleypue was spared, and the others were drowned in the moat while it still held water.



# 36

As Super G descended upon Berserk Hold from the cave, Plumchiss' daughter Cutiepig came into the dining room. Plumchiss said, "I told you to stay downstairs!"

Cutiepig said, "What's the p— Oh my! Are those real monkeys?"

Plumchiss said, "Don't be rude, *schnaub*, Miss Thing. And go back downstairs."

Cutiepig took a moment to absorb the faces of the men who looked at her. Then she said, "What's the point of being the next Lady Zaftig if I have to sit 'n' wait downstairs?"

Plumchiss said, "You go, *oink*, back downstairs right now, missy!"

Cutiepig pointed to the other children. "What about them?"

Plumchiss said, "They's already up here."

Cutiepig protested. "I'm already up here too."

Plumchiss harrumphed oinkily and went back to washing dishes.

Gronk was greatly smitten with Cutiepig. She was the spitting image of her mother but younger and more lithe. Her dirndl was pulled more tightly around her luscious curves, and Cutiepig's six nubile breasts looked like lumps of love in Gronk's dreamy mind. He stood and pulled out a chair for

her. “Would the lady care to join us?”

She said, “Ok,” and sat.

“I’m Gronk, aye. Nice to meet ya.”

“Nice to meet you too, Gronk. I’m Cutiepig.” Plumchiss shook her head disapprovingly without turning around, and another round of introductions were made.

Cutiepig said, “Where’s Super G?” She had heard stories about him all her life and was eager to meet the man after looking out the window at Draghor for an hour or more.

Plumchiss said, “He’s, *roink*, up in the power cave. Gone to check on some biniss. Don’t, *oink*, you badger our guests now!” To the assembled men, Plumchiss said, “Sorry,” and then, “Not much goes on ‘round the Hold these days.”

Gronk flirted with Cutiepig while the four children generally spoke with their guests. The bosun wooed them with bombastic tales of the Arcturan campaign.

Then Smelga entered. She said, “*Oink-squee*, Super G wants us all in the grand hall.” Smelga would have been severely deformed even without brain worms. Her one arm was shriveled like a polio vaccine gone wrong. Her navel was square in the middle of her uncovered chest where a grotesquely lumpy sternum bone was most unsettling. Her six saggy breasts were low on her stomach so that, tucked into her smock at least, the husks of two shriveled breasts appeared to rest upon an unusually large and unsightly fupa. Smelga hacked some phlegm and spat out the window.

While the others’ attention was diverted, Gronk said, “Arrr! Tell us now, Cutiepig! How ya stay so purdy livin’ out here in da woods? Ya look likes a real cosmopolitan city gal. Aye, ya do.”

Cutiepig giggled as Ronjerimo offered to lead the outlanders down to the great hall. She said, “Heehee, *oink*, I could show ya.”

Gronk looked at the bosun. The bosun looked at the captain. The captain shrugged at the bosun, so the bosun shrugged at Gronk who said to Cutiepig, “Barr! Reckon we’d

like that. Aye, we would.”

Cutiepig said, “I like the way you talk, Mr. Gronk.” As the outlanders and their porcine hosts filed out of the dining room, Gronk and Cutiepig held back.

Plumchiss said, “Go on you two flirty farts! Down to the hall. I’ll be there when I’m done, *oink*, with these dishes.”

Cutiepig took Gronk by the hand and led him down the hall, but not all the way to the grand hall. In the shadows, the aspiring lovebirds stole away, and she led him to her room. The castle was very large, but Gronk soon enough was glad to get to her bedroom. Gronk leaned in to kiss the luscious lips under Cutiepig’s long but ladylike snout. Before his lips touched hers, she said, “You wanted to know how I stay so pretty?” She was very proud of her magic trick. She made it all by herself.

“Yarr, guess so.” She led him to her bathroom where some sausages were curing in the air. Then Gronk looked at the sausages more closely.

Cutiepig said, “It’s a secret my mother taught me. The Lady Zaftig, that’s my mother. Plumchiss.”

Gronk was lost for words. There was some muck piled under each string of sausages. When Cutiepig scooped some with a small spoon she said, “Just, *oink*, a spoonful a day keeps the wrinkles away!” Then she set the spoon down. “I already had one this morning.” Then she took his hand, but Able Seaman Gronk was transfixed.

Gronk said, “Da fuark is that?” As she told him, Gronk concentrated hard on the words Super G had left them. Be patient. Don’t start any trouble. If you see something, just smile and be pleasant.

Cutiepig said, “Them’s pedey-peders. Being outlander, I figured you must know all about ‘em.” She explained to him that if you skinned a few pig-squirrels and cut their legs off really carefully, you could sew their mouths to their butts to make a chocolate factory. She told him the chocolate was magic because it got the life energy of the pig-squirrels. She

told him that if you put a snake-frog down at the bottom, then the snake-frog would eat the pedey-peder so the pig-squirrels would turn into the snake-frog's guts. When the snake-frog tied onto the bottom ate the magic chocolate, it turned it into beauty cream on the bottom end. Cutiepig said, "That's what that is in the spoon. Chocolate beauty cream." In the bathroom hung four strings of psychotic flayed pig-squirrels sewn together. Cutiepig said, "That's what the twine is for." She pointed to the twine wrapped under each snake-frog's jaw bone. "*Oink*, if you don't keep the snake-frog tied on, it won't wanna eat the pedey."

Gronk resolved the beady, black protruding eyes of the little creatures staring out at him with madness and despair. One snake-frog retracted a fang and bit just higher, then levered its husk so that another half inch of pedey-peder disappeared inside its mouth. As it climbed, it dished a dollop of Cutiepig's cream onto the saucer below.

Cutiepig said, "So, *roink*. You gonna fuck me now or what?"

"I, uh— er— Narr. Fuark narr, lass." Gronk tried to hustle past her.

"What's wrong?" She blocked his path. "*Squeee!* Thought you said I were purdy?"

"Arrr! I should be down thurr. Aye, with Super G is where."

She put her hand on his crotch and said, "Just a quickie, c'mon."

"Er— ahh— me dick don't work. Sorry. I forgot."

"It doesn't work?"

Gronk said, "Narrr she don't." He pushed past her not knowing where he could go in the big castle. "Ol' Limpy Gronk. That's what they call us. Aye, slipped me mind is all." Gronk spoke calmly as he closed with the doorway. "Arrr. Captain'll be sore displeased if we skip out on 'im. Aye, 'e will. Shipshape sore. Bo! Arrr!" Then Gronk was in the hallway resisting the urge to holler and run.

In Berserk Hold's great hall, Super G was about to address the tattered remnant of the project he had brought forth in the hidden coastal sanctuary. A teenage pig likely around Cutiepig's age loudly proclaimed, "*Rrrroink!* This is stupid. Why'd we have to hide the TV?"

The Lady Zaftig plopped a poop in her pants right then and there. Super G had forbidden TV in Berserk Hold. In fact, Plumchiss had first learned about the pedey-peder's beautifying properties on broadcast programming from New Snoutistan. Plumchiss said, "Oh my!"

Then Gronk burst into the hall. "Captain!"

When all the pigs in Berserk Hold were dead, the party soon departed for the beach.

When Richard first cast eyes on the light green oasis among the more somber tones of jungle greens, he swore he saw the skeleton of a dragon disappearing at the far end of the meadow. It was gone in a flash, and he never saw it again. Five days out from Braido Goran's farm, Richard, Fátima, Yessica, Anne, and Alexandra found Berserk Hold. There they lived happily ever after.

# 37

THE skiff appeared down the beach, and the captain asked for volunteers inland. He gave his graces to those who wanted to go back the ship.

Nkromo said, “Do or die! Sea Star fly!”

Gronk saw the other’s silence and said, “Do or die! The Grim Ghost’s hosts!”

Sergei said, “I’m a sailor, Captain, not a knight.”

The captain said, “Very well.”

Guido, relieved, said, “Aye, Captain, me captain. We’s a sailor not a knight. Nardy narr, narrr.”

Demasi said nothing, and the captain said, “I’ll tell you, men. You’re all fine sailors.” He awarded Nkromo and Gronk meritorious field promotions to petty officer and sent the five of them back to The Grim Ghost 2. His parting words were, “To be honest, it’s not looking real good here.” He pointed to the prisoner, the paladin, and Draghor. He said, “I’ve never seen anything like it.” The captain himself was a former Guild Knight, what the Guild Navy called a mustanger. “If what they say is true, and the Eternal Enemy himself is out there beyond the jungle, then we have to try for the assassination. Technically, that supersedes the Ascension mission, but, honestly, I think Super G here is the whole blasted Ascension mission to begin with, so I’m going to keep the faith go back out there

again.”

The captain didn't ask if the bosun wanted to go back to the ship. The bosun was a mustanger too. The captain told Jim Bobson to go back to the ship. He said, “Jim Bobson, make sure these men's pay is adjusted,” meaning Gronk and Nkromo

Ishikawa, the paladin, Super G, the dragon, the captain, and the bosun took flight to take New Snoutistan from the air. Super G would use the Amulark to circumvent the tank and turret forces in the suburbs to attack the downtown region directly. Flying high in the sky, the last traces of the mystical beach faded behind them. There was no long line of seraphim along any shore on the planetary home of New Snoutistan. It was gone forever when they flew away and the planet was almost fully formed.

As the winching crew hauled the small boat up and over The Grim Ghost 2's gunnel, each heave of the rope dilated the sky at its zenith. As the skiff rose from the water, the sky darkened overhead. When it was brought about on deck, the disc of night ate a cloud high above. Around the disc, a clear blue and cyan sky cast over calm seas to the horizon. A royal blue planet with fluorescent orange seas and puffy white clouds cast a vibrant tinge of indigo ultraviolet on the deck of the otherwise sunny and calm Grim Ghost 2, once again on the Fractal Field.

Even flying, it took Draghor two years to cross the Great Basin. The paladin had made a similar river journey in only months and was headed back inland after finally reaching the coast just days before. During the search for New Snoutistan, Super G told his new companions about the arc of history as he was witness to it.

After Super G was completely dispensed with by Rosalie, she dumped his leftover grits into the lava lake. Even in the lava, the prisoner did not die. Through sheer force of will, he was able to reconstitute himself. He climbed out of the sulfurous caldera molecularly bonded with gold drawn from the

soupy sea of lava. Then, even after a thousand years, Super G remembered the prophecy of the plainspeople and went to the beach for Draghor. When he arrived, the bones were animated.

The prisoner said, "You're alive!" He found the bones next to the skewed stones of the deconstructed seraph, granite not jade. Draghor was sleeping, wrapped in his tail. Then the prisoner's words roused him from his slumber. The prisoner said, "I was so worried. Last time I was here, I dug you up, but there was no life in you, ay!"

Draghor said, "I must have been sleeping."

At first, the prisoner tried to ride Draghor's shoulders, but his bones would get stuck in the dragon's shoulder blades and wing bones, and it was very uncomfortable. The prisoner made some rope, just enough to drape a ten-foot-long hammock of broad banana leaves inside Draghor's ribs. Moving through the jungle very quickly and at the expense of silence, the dragon made the first trip with the risen prisoner from the coast to the Wall of Failure in about one month. For a very long time, the dragon galloped beyond the wall, across No Man's Plain, day and night, summer, spring, fall, and winter, year in and year out until the streams flowing generally to the west became semi-closed networks of water flowing across paradoxical topography. It was the Great Plains. Super G, at that time, found pigs living on the plain as plainspeople, but there he never again encountered the descendants of the City of Diamonds.

After the prisoner routed Emerald Station in what was called the First Emerald Holocaust, the Dark Lord filled the city with an eviler breed of pigs mutated with the intergenerational effects of an exotic brain worm breed. Super G destroyed those pigs in the Second Emerald Holocaust, and then the Eternal Enemy repopulated it again. During the time of the second repopulation of Emerald Station, the Southern Empire, which was at war with the Dark Lord's GFB, went into decline.



While the war went well for the Dark Lord, and even with the more malicious strain of swine, the Eternal Enemy was never able to turn the land around the Great Basin into a single room inside the Jigantemum Jibode. As long as the prisoner roamed the surface and waged war on the GFB, the Eternal Enemy could not change the nature of the land. Until the change was made, the Slitherfish would not directly attack the prisoner. Early on in the learning of its machine learning algorithms, the Slitherfish had decided that brazen attacks on hyper-strong email threats far from the safety of the Jigantemum Jibode were not optimized for success. The Slitherfish waited for the prisoner to come to the Jigantemum Jibode where he was weaker. Sometimes the fishy slitherer might slither or stray a mile or two from an entrance to the fractal catacombs, but no further. That was it. The Slitherfish's software constraints prevented it from flooding the surface with the creatures created deep in the guts of hell, so the Slitherfish bode its time and Super G bode his own.

Super G roamed far and wide. He guided the pigs of the plain in the way that was right. When they followed his laws, he nurtured them. When they turned to wickedness, he destroyed them. After a long time, the prisoner achieved a stasis of righteous culture on the plain, but he never found those waiting for the dragon's skeleton. When Super G had long established that the Great Plains were not in the domain of the Eternal Enemy, but instead were under his own dominion, he began the selective breeding program. After some eventual successes, Super G constructed Berserk Hold with Draghor and Berserkevich's ancestors.

In later times, those following the embarkation of The Grim Ghost 2 and its departure for Exland, Ruby Town and New Snoutistan were at war. Super G meant to end the war for Ruby Town with death from above and the Powers of Zarganthos. The dragon beat its wide webbed wings, *whoosh whoosh whoosh*, as they flew over Ruby Town. The Ruby Town wizard

was not, at that time, on the high platform. The bolt of lightning still cast forth from the jiggling staff of power planted in its squat receptacle. The gyrating bolt of lightning powered an expansive egg-shaped force field cresting not far above that highest platform atop the Ruby Fortress. It kept Ruby Town's seventy-five million men, women, and children safe from the vices of the Eternal Enemy's porcine forces. It was through the commercial activity associated with the war between Ruby Town and New Snoutistan that Super G was able to amass a slew of technological modernities for Berserk Hold. Word was that the main GFB forces were pursuing the Southern Empire all the way to where the land was called the Northern Empire, and that New Snoutistan was disconnected and exposed.

The captain and the others in the dragon saw the Foibled Mountains loom. Behind them, they saw the Wall of Failure. At the wall, Draghor descended on the long arc of the boulder field at the jungle's tectonic termination. Draghor set down not fifty miles from where the paladin hid his own sword and armor before traveling to Vineton.

Super G had his own storeroom hidden among a few mountainously large boulders. With massive steel chains run through mechanical efficiency blocks, what are sometimes called pulleys, the prisoner winched an SSX-762 Ruby Town Fusion Reactor™ into Draghor's rib cage and secured it with bolts. Super G set 16 slender plasma magnets inside Draghor's ribs with straps. Then he engaged the small force field. It was the same technology that shielded Ruby Town but very small. It would shield them lying on the hammock in the battle to come.

Super G disconnected the Gatling gun from Draghor's skull. Then he winched up a particle beam energy weapon that was ten feet long like a lustrous cobalt and graphite unicorn's horn. Bolted in place with fasteners forged long ago, the prisoner ran the power cord to the power plant. He was careful to leave slack in the line for the twisting dragon's acrobatics. Without the Powers of Zarganthos, the big laser turret was too

heavy, and it imbalanced Draghor. After the Paradox of Zarganthos unraveled, the particle beam's long metal boom was as light as a feather.

The paladin said, "If it's to war, then I'd as soon have my armor. It's not far from here." When the party reached the paladin's spot, the dragon set down upon it. First one hind foot, then the other, then two beats of the wings, then a brief drop, and the dragon settled on his massive claws and paws. The small metal fittings on The Sea Star's wheel shone where it set like a talisman at the dragon's breast. Zorolo da Vinci said, "My armor will only fit in my natural form."

The prisoner was eager to see what the bosun's story was about. When the paladin morphed, Super G admired the purple, blue, and white cuttlefish with gold and brown eyes crossed by curious W-shaped pupils. Ishikawa was already in the bosun's stair when the octopus came into The Grim Ghost's galley. He too was astonished by his close look at the paladin's native form. Zorolo da Vinci floated four feet from the floor of the little crag where the armor waited while he was *Descriptio LeFranco* in Vineton and later *Durr Badminton* in Emerald Station. Then he donned his armor.

Two years and some months on from Berserk Hold, the remaining party reached the outskirts of New Snoutistan. Draghor set down. Before attacking the city, Super G dispatched the much smaller and less conspicuous men into New Snoutistan to attempt to establish contact with the technician or the Ruby Town Resister's Front. The paladin stayed on the outskirts with Super G.

Ishikawa said, "I'm with you, Super G." Then the bosun and the captain slunk into New Snoutistan working with orders, the captain and the bosun both believed, from the kernel of truth himself.

Super G felt certain that Berserkevich had died in the Hold, but still he hoped what he heard was true: that Berserkevich left the Hold healthy in his time.

# 38

PIMPLEFUS Gashgore lamented the death of the only child he'd raised as his son, Reserchico Gashgore. Reserchico was only four years old when he died. He was trampled by a platoon of Snout Shockers, the Shockers being a reformation of the old Imperial Guards in New Snoutistan. Thirty years earlier, Pimplefus had given Berserkevich the laser disc, and Berserkevich had twin sons born to Pimplefus' daughter Emerelda in the following year. Twenty-five years later, the elder of the twins, Skronor and Skryrad, Skronor being the elder by several minutes, brought Pimplefus a newborn child and asked him to raise it as his own. Pimplefus raised that child for four years until the Shockers ran him down and stomped his little body, the spitting image of newborn Berserkevich, to a bloody pulp.

A band of protesters marched down the street where Reserchico played. They chanted and waved signs like *FECES ISN'T FOOD* and *SHIT IS AN UGLY WORD*. When the Shockers appeared, the dissidents ran, but little Reserchico was not so fast.

Pimplefus lamented, "He was just a boy! He was just a boy! Why'd you run him down?! Why'd you kill my boy?!" Most of Reserchico was scraped off the sidewalk and replaced on Pimplefus' hearth where he lamented alone. Pimplefus did not tend his shop in the western suburbs that day. On the following day, he conceded to practicality.

At the store, his manager said, “Hey, Pip. What’s up?”

Pip said, “Hey, Schmedward. Not much. What’s up with you?”

Schmedward said, “You seem a little down in the dumps.”

Pip said, “How was business yesterday?” Pip listened to the business report in his electronics shop. Pip sold and repaired electronics, and he could get black market Ruby Town tech for the right buyers.

Schmedward said in the summary, “Oh, and we got a call about,” he checked his notepad on the desk, “a leavenizing diffraculonics rig? Are they still supported?”

Pip wasn’t listening closely, but the leavenizing diffraculonics got his attention. It was a code word. An old one. He said casually, “Leavenizing diffraculonics? Yeah, I think so.”

Schmedward went on to cite the cash register totals.

Pip said, “He was just a boy.”

“Sir?”

Pip, roused from his daze, said, “Oh— Ahhh, nothing.” He asked if the leavenation client left a number. He expected a certain ten digits, and Schmedward read them off to him.

Pip said, “Very well. Tell them we can help them.” He knew the number was no client of theirs. “They called yesterday, right?”

“Yessir.”

Pip was already falling into the dread of the pulverized body at home. His mind was boggled by the timing. *Why now?* He said, “Alright, Schmedward. Keep up the good work. I’ll be in my office most of the day. I’ve got some tax stuff, and I’ll probably be busy all day.” Pip would be out of the office once again on the following day. He went instead to the location code-named LEAVENIZING DIFFRACULONICS.

Schmedward said, “Sounds good.”

From his second story window, Pip surveyed the street. He said, “He was just a boy,” and cried.

Before leaving Berserk Hold, Super G used the replicator to, among other things, create latex masks for the bosun and

the captain. Ishikawa had what would have been the finest swords in Japan in his day, and the finest bow with the finest arrows.

Dressed in pigface, the captain and the bosun waited in Pork Park, New Snoutistan. On the second day of waiting, Pip showed up promptly at the time he was expected, and the signaling went exactly according to Super G's specifications. They got in Pip's truck, and he took them to a restaurateur's front friendly to the resistance.

The captain said, "I'm with OLD BUDDY. He's out to the west side of town right now."

Pip said, "I thought OLD BUDDY must have died. No one I know's heard anything twenty years or more." It was thirty years.

The captain said, "OLD BUDDY told me to ask you about LEAVENIZING DIFFRACULONICS."

Pip said, "What kind of LEAVENIZING DIFFRACULONICS are we dealing with here?"

The captain said, "OLD BUDDY wanted to know what happened with THE BIG GUY's software and if he ever came back to MAKE DINNER."

Pip said, "THE BIG GUY never came back to MAKE DINNER, but he MADE DINNER while he was here. This was so long ago!"

The captain said, "Then you gave THE BIG GUY the disc?"

Pip said, "I did, but there was a terrible ruckus with THE TRAFFIC that day and I never knew if he got home. I never heard anything, so I feared the worst. If he made it, then I would have expected an improvement but it's gotten bad. I haven't had a real client in fifteen years." Pip took a sip of his dirty brown iced toilet water and said in obfuscation, "He probably started taking his electronics repair business elsewhere because I never heard of somebody repairing their leavenizing diffraculonics two times. That'd be crazy. Just buy a new one."

The captain said, "OLD BUDDY also wants me to tell you

that he has the JIMJAM OF HARPANTHOS,” and he winked. Super G told him Pip would understand.

Pip’s eyes went wide. “*The* JIMJAM OF HARPANTHOS?” The captain and the bosun nodded gravely. Pip teared up. *He was just a boy.*

The captain said, “So OLD BUDDY wants you to tell the CUSTODIAL SERVICE to get a move on because BREAKFAST is coming as soon as we leave.”

Pip tasted the sweet justice of hope. “BREAKFAST?”

The captain and the bosun nodded gravely. The captain said, “And OLD BUDDY wants data on the latest [*defense formations*] and [*military compounds*].”

Pip laughed and said, “Well... if it’s for BREAKFAST... I think we can do that.” He drove them to a warehouse in an industrial district.

Super G didn’t want to bias the mustangers against Berserkevich by what they’d seen at Berserk Hold, so he didn’t tell them what making dinner was. It was the plan to mate Berserkevich with Pip’s daughter Emerelda. While Pip drove them, Super G was out on the outskirts of New Snoutistan. Skronor and Skryrad, both truly Berserkevich, were under the dome in Ruby Town.

The gravel in the parking lot in front of the warehouse crunched and rolled under the tires of Pip’s red truck when he parked. In the basement of the warehouse was a sub-basement that connected to the Jiganthemum Jibode. Agents in Ruby Town had stabilized the structure such that Ruby Town and New Snoutistan were connected along a little-known fiber just barely scratching the surface of the Jiganthemum Jibode. Under the laws of Ruby Town, the tunnel to New Snoutistan was a military complex owned and operated by the Red Army. Truly, the tunnel was within the Jiganthemum Jibode, just barely.

# 39

WHEN the weather vane wheeled around, the Space Marine on watch atop the Ruby Spire dove below. Like high Othanc where Gandalf and Saruman once battled, the stone escarpment had no fence or rail. Only a single steep stair pierced the patio's red paving stones. Corporal Kirk dove below with news. He said, "Staff Sergeant! The weather vane's rolled full over!"

Kirk's platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Crowl, reported the change to Space Marine command via a system of stabilized tendrils within the Jiganthemum Jibode. From within the Jiganthemum Jibode, inspectors came to verify the reading on the weather vane. Then Staff Sergeant Crowl's platoon went on a suicide mission into the Jiganthemum Jibode. They would detonate the thermonuclear devices planted deep in the innermost heart of Hades.

The Space Marines waged war on the Eternal Enemy from another dimension that had never known brain worms, and so they were almost totally immune to the magic that permeated the Jiganthemum Jibode. Each marine wore power armor designed to fit the standard hatch in the Jiganthemum Jibode. There were some reaches unreachable in the bulky armor, but at nine feet tall, four feet from side to side, and four more from front to back, the whirring powered armor had only modest



clearance along many halls.

To the strong advantage of Crowl and his men, the Slitherfish's software forbade its interference in regular Space Marine operations. The platoon drove deeper and deeper into the depths of the Jiganthemum Jibode, blasters blasting and micro-missiles firing all the while. When they reached what their map told them was a room just beneath the Jiganthemum Jibode's main control room, the throne room, they found neither the expected nuclear warheads nor the panel that would send the remote signal to uncountably many gigatons of other nuclear weapons strewn about the Jiganthemum Jibode.

The nuclear weapons were missing. In their place, Crowl found a house of horrors run by a nine-foot-tall woman in a matte black body suit. Great black horns were upon her forehead, two-foot-long apiece. Instead of coming to a pair of points above her head, each horn terminated in the phallic bulb of an engorged glans. When the Space Marines breached her sanctum, she cast a glare at them beneath the pair of thick black dick horns that were like field goal posts before her. They shone and gleamed like healthy keratin.

The woman had a squad of tortured creatures that she sent against the marines when they barged into the room about as big as four soccer fields. The creature's weapons could not destroy the Space Marines' power armor, and the Space Marines cut them down. The woman had three henchwomen in purple, yellow, and green formfitting body suits individually. About seven feet tall, their horns were much smaller and pointy. The Slitherfish had provided these women with advanced weaponry, and they killed half of Crowl's men before the marines cut the women down as well. Unable to complete the mission, Crowl arrested the tall woman in the black body suit. He put her in hypercuffs that were like a pair of elephant's feet encasing her hands and arms nearly to the elbow. Space Marine Command would want to interrogate her regarding the missing nukes and more.

Crowl's mission plan showed that the way to avoid getting

lost in the Jiganthemum Jibode was to go always up and to the left, whenever possible, at every turn of the maze. Whenever tunnels diverged or a room had many paths of departure, Space Marine protocol for the mission dictated that Crowl should always head up and to the left to avoid becoming lost in hell. He reasoned, wrongly, that the best way to get back was to head down and to the right. The remnant of the platoon became lost. After a narrow scrape saw Crowl lose another four men, they were forced through a bottleneck in the architecture past which the armor would not fit. Crowl was committed to the down/right course, so the men abandoned their armor. The squeeze was such that the tall woman could barely fit through a narrow grinding hallway with her hypercuffs on. The Space Marines kept their small arms on her. The woman knew the laser rifles could easily kill her. She tried to use her magic on the marines, but they were immune to it inside the Jiganthemum Jibode.

Crowl, Kirk, and eleven remaining Space Marines emerged from the Jiganthemum Jibode into the basement of Pip's building just as Pip parked his truck. At last, the marines had returned, purely by chance, to the terminator of the stabilized tendril. With fortune's favor, they entered the sub-basement, but the marines could not immediately tell that they were out of the Jiganthemum Jibode. The woman likewise could not tell, but she sensed a change in the magical background. She tried mind control on the Space Marines. For some reason, in the fiery confusion of a new planet, her magic did work on them in New Snoutistan.

In a sultry and very deep voice, she said, "All of you take off your clothes." She had it in mind to make them engage in dirty sodomy and then eat the mess off of each other in oral acts. Sensing nothing amiss, the Space Marines set their small arms down, dropped their packs, and began to disrobe. As Pip, the captain, and the bosun descended from the basement to the sub-basement, the woman said, "Lean over that desk, Sergeant Crowl."

Pip opened the door onto a catwalk near the thirty-foot-high ceiling of the sub-basement level. On the floor was a ring of grey stones looking like a water well of unusually large radius. A small gantry crane was in the sub-basement hanging a circular gray stone, ten feet in diameter, used cap the well. Pip paused. He expected no one. He held up his hand to signal Old Buddy's men. *Halt!*

The captain and the bosun hardly believed their eyes.

A grimy floating rodent emerged from the Jigantemum Jibode wearing a dingy pink sun bonnet streaked with grime and blood. As the woman said, "Now fuck him in the ass!," the rodent floated to her hypercuffs on a bed of barely bending mammalian tentacles. When it touched the hypercuffs, they clicked and fell away. Private Xor sidled up behind Crowl. The woman said in falsetto baritone, "I wanna see a nice steamer on that big hard dick in about one minute, Sergeant."

Bosun Bicklesworth called from the catwalk, "Hysterical Malice! You old bitch!"

Hysterical Malice's voice cracked as she turned and shrieked a stutter. "*Cub— Cub— Cairomon!!!* What are *yyyyoooouuuu* doing here?!?!" In a sudden panic, she closed the distance to the well. She was eager to make her escape and no longer thinking about the suddenly confused Space Marines.

The captain lifted a greasy monkey wrench from where it lay beside the unbolted hatch cover to the sub-basement. Just as Hysterical Malice made the jump over the threshold into her foul domain, the captain beamed her in head with the wrench. It hit her square between the horns, and she fell back unconscious.

Crowl nearly attacked the bosun and the captain as they descended and then dropped from the catwalk onto the sub-basement floor. The captain said, "Don't shoot! You fell under her spell."

Crowl, whose ancestors had never known brain worms, sensed that the captain and the bosun were also healthy. He told his naked marines, "Hold your fire."

The captain and the bosun sat on Hysterical Malice's head, back to back, such that her horns came up between their legs. Each man started stroking a phallic horn with one hand while tightly holding the base with the other like a rodeo rider.

Crowl said, "What are you doing?"

The bosun said, "Barrrr! There's only one way to kill a bitch like this."

Hysterical Malice did not know that she would be reconstituted under ordinary death like that from the laser fire she feared. At any time, and because the wife, as it were, of the Jigantemum Jibode ruminated into the sub-basement from the open well, she could have made her escape, even then, by letting the marines shoot her, but she was afraid of dying. The Dark Lord mused in the mistaken estimations of death made by her many minions.

Crowl wanted to shoot Hysterical Malice in Pip's sub-basement, but the bosun assured him, "Narrr!!! She'll be reconstituted inside the Jibode if we're not careful. Stand by!" The Space Marines dressed while the captain and the bosun sat on Hysterical Malice's head. They stroked her big black horns.

Hysterical Malice regained consciousness. She panicked but did not have super strength beyond the Jigantemum Jibode. She could not get up with the large men sitting on her head. She screeched, "What are you doing?! Cairomon!!! Get off of me!!!"

Cairomon said, "Narr," and kept stroking.

Hysterical Malice said, "Cairomon! What the fuck— Ahhh! Agggghhh!!!"

Hysterical Malice screamed and thrashed, but she could not attend her magic while the men stroked her horns. Soon, the keratin sheen of the black horns became velvety. The bosun and the captain became more deliberate and forceful in their stroking.

Hysterical Malice protested their molestations. "Get off of me, Cairomon, you motherfucker! Get your fat ass off of me! Wahhh! Wahhh!" The horns became very warm and swelled

a little. Under the continued stimulations, the velvety material on the horns broke, and there was blood. As the fuzz on a reindeer's antlers, the black sheaths came away revealing red, white, and blue striped phallus antler bones looking like grotesque bloody popsicles.

The captain and the bosun kept their balance and their rhythm as Hysterical Malice thrashed and protested. "Cairomon, you fucking bastard! Agghhh!!!" When all the black velvet was sloughed off and only the bloody gristle of fascia remained on the colorful bones, Hysterical Malice's eyes began to sink into her head.

The bosun said, "Bo! Hurr! We's almost there now, Captain. Aye, we are! Yarr dee!"

The spasmic nature of the woman's protestations increased, but the mustangers sat on her head and held her down. The rodent emerged from behind a crate and tried to float back into the Jigantemum Jibode. Corporal Kirk sprayed it with his machine gun laser. The loud crack of laser light cutting the air put Hysterical Malice over the edge. Little white worms of smivage and shmegma crawled from the tips of her antler bones as her eyes sank into her skull. She said, "Oh! Ohh! Ohhh!"

The captain and the bosun kept up their rhythmic stroking. Pushed to climax, Hysterical Malice's brains started to shoot out of her antlers. First one spurt of brain matter, then another, then a big spurt that sent her brains spraying ten feet or more, then another spurt, and then Hysterical Malice was well dead. Her depleted face showed her age. Her sunken eyes and cheeks showed the final shriek of horror frozen in her dying moment.

The Guild Sailors and the Space Marines held parley. The Marines said they were stationed in Ruby Town. The Guildsmen said they were about to destroy New Snoutistan.

Pip said, "Here you go." He handed the captain a laser disc with his most up-to-date information on the New Snoutistan GFB, and also rumors from the south.

The captain said, “And there’s rumors of the Eternal Enemy so we’re going to try for the assassination.”

Crowl said, “We know the way to the Eternal Enemy’s throne room. The thermonuclear devices were supposed to be just beneath it, but they were gone, and we found this bitch and few more like her instead.”

The captain said, “*The* throne room?”

Crowl said, “That’s right.”

“Why didn’t you attack it instead?”

“Assault on the throne room? That’s a suicide mission.” Crowl’s orders had been to blow himself up as soon as he got to the control panel, and what he meant by the term *suicide* was really foolhardiness. He said, “The Slitherfish will defend the throne room at all costs. Space Marines protocols or no, the Slitherfish isn’t letting anyone near the Dark Mage. The Dark Fish moved the nukes, likely.”

The captain said, “Can you lead us there?”

Staff Sergeant Crowl considered that he was already on a suicide mission, and that he had not used his life to destroy the Jigantemum Jibode as planned, so he agreed to take the captain and the bosun to the throne room. He said, “But I only know how to get there from Ruby Town. We got lost trying to get back. I can’t believe we even came out in Snoutistan. I figured we’d be lost in the underbelly of things forever.”

The captain told Crowl about Super G and the flying dragon. Crowl agreed to accompany the mustang sailors back to the rally point, and Pip gave the marines pig disguises. Eleven marines left with two sailors and the technician that evening. Crowl, Kirk, and another marine had heard a similar tale of Draghor and his golden rider, third hand, from Skryrad.

# 40

ROSALIE met Ben when she was twenty-one years old. She was studying business administration, and Ben was a professor. She was listening to the other students' minds with her psychic powers, and Ben noticed her listening to them with his own. They were married when she was twenty-two. Ben was a federal employee, and he disclosed classified psychic information to her at home. He finagled his clandestine office to hire his wife as a field agent. When Rosalie was twenty-six, she was onboarded as a federal employee.

When Rosalie was fifty-one, among other things, she was running psychic cointelpro memes on the internet. Her intention, in one instance, was to analyze data on the male psyche by collecting data on the psychological traits of men who cut off their penises. The research was funded under the auspices of some psychiatric grant that had been awarded to a fictitious sub-department in what had once been Ben's clandestine organization. Rosalie's memes encouraged men and boys of all ages to "become a woman" by going through simultaneous castration and otherwise unmanly emasculation to make a penis receptacle below the anus.

When Rosalie was fifty-nine, under the auspices of another program that she herself had authored, she surprised one of

the men that had taken her bait. The patient underwent general anesthesia, but then he woke on a secret dungeon movie set in a hidden room next to the hospital's operating theaters. With the unwell man in restraints, a fat man came forth to slightly stab his scrotum with a scalpel. The fat man wore a clown costume and a red bozo nose with blue on white face paint. The fat clown began to felate the man as the Novocain cream numbed the slice.

The clown said, "Mmm, *slurp*. This is just a dream."

The man was groggy with anesthesia, but the clown did stimulate an erection. When he was fully erect, the clown bit off the head of the man's penis off to produce a deflatory fountain of red arterial blood. The clown put his index fingers into the scrotum and ripped it open. He vivisected one testicle. The victim was held with surgical restraints such that his attempted thrashing did not move his emplattered testicle at all as the clown scraped and stabbed it with two rusty nails. The clown ate the shaft of the penis that it could bite before the retracted nub went deep inside. The clown demolished the other testicle more slowly and medically. He used electricity and grains of salt. Then the anesthesia kicked in, and the man lost consciousness.

The man woke in the hospital, and the attentive nurse asked him if he was ok. The man was very uncomfortable. The nurse, a male nurse, said, "Is everything ok, ma'am?" The man was unsure.

The clown brought the head of the man's penis to Rosalie's agent's agent's agent's man that was waiting for the clown man to come out of the secret room in the hospital. Rosalie got the organ on ice four hours later. She brought it home when she left the office at five o'clock on the dot. She sliced it through the urethra and flattened it on a cutting board. Then she chopped it. She fried the penis pieces in butter over medium heat. When the little strips were nearly well done, she added chopped mushrooms. When it was all fried, she made mushroom ravioli with pasta and olive oil sauce.



During the man's visit to the hospital for a follow-up appointment, he reported that he sincerely regretted going through with the "sex reassignment surgery." The man reported having persistent nightmares over the hallucination induced by the anesthesia.

The doctor said, "It sounds to me like you might have gender dysphoria therapy aversion syndrome. I think you should speak to one of our psychiatrists."

"You think so?"

"That's my medical opinion."

The psychiatrist, Dr. Hyderabad, watched the clown eat the man's penis and testicles. She was Rosalie's agent sitting still along the sick dungeon wall in a life-sized teddy bear costume. She said to the man, "It sounds to me like you're extremely disturbed, and I'm going to recommend commitment."

The man said, "No! It was just a dream I was telling you about. Everyone has dreams! Don't lock me up!"

The doctor said, "You came here for my evaluation, and now that you don't like what I've told you, you're getting angry. Honestly, I'm frightened that you're dangerously insane. You've gone through with the surgery, which is fine, but I'm worried it's just a matter of time until you act on your fantasy to eat another man's manhood away." Then with a malicious wink she said, "Isn't that right, Gayboy1994?"

It was his screen name on the website where he thought some community of online trannies were supporting his mutilation. Dr. Hyderabad had already called security to be outside her door when she told him that she was recommending commitment. Even castrated and otherwise emasculated, the man had the volition to get up and leave. The security guard took him down in the hall, and he felt severe pain in his groin wound.

Dr. Hyderabad said, "You are clearly sick, but we can help you deal with your mental illness. You're clearly a danger to yourself and others. But we can help you."

# 41

WHEN Rosalie was thirty-five years old, she was the director of a fictitious department. At home, she asked Ben, “What color do you think?” and handed him a few paint sampler pamphlets.

Ben said, “I don’t know, Rosie. Whatever you think.”

She frowned and said, “Don’t be a dud, love! Tell me which one you think.”

“That one.”

“Really? This one?”

“Or whichever one you think.”

“I think I’ll just leave these here and see what I think.” She set the sampler pamphlets in her purse and set another similar set on the ledge of the wall behind Ben’s desk. The second set was wired with a camera that transmitted to Rosalie footage of Ben typing his computer credentials.

Three weeks hence, Ben reported to the converted nuclear silo where his office was located. When attempting to pull into the parking lot, the red light did not turn green, and the little beep was not friendly. Ben called security on his wireless telephone. He said, “I’m having a problem with my ID, Janet.”

Janet said, “It says your access was terminated, Doctor.” Ben told her it was absurd and that he would go check on it.

The ultimate resolution was that Rosalie had used Ben's credentials in the human resources data system of the facility where he was the secret director. She logged fraudulent and vile sexual harassment documents into his personnel file, along with some standard HR processing that terminated Ben's keycard access. On their last phone call two weeks later, Janet said, "You're disgusting!"

During those two weeks, Rosalie, whose office was also deep inside the converted nuclear silo complex, oversaw the assassination of the largest feasible portion of the men in Ben's organization. After that, Rosalie inserted fraudulent documents into federal databases far and wide using Ben's back door credentials as her own. By force of Rosalie's judicious hacking, the news of Ben's termination never went through to the IT department where Rosalie assumed Ben's identity in the data stream. After that, Rosalie was the de facto commander of the psychic warfare program in the United States of America.

Rosalie's lobbyists worked in the shadows to make sure the Congress of the United States of America never thought about psy-war. The Congress refused to stop funding Rosalie's fake programs. Rosalie had sweatshop boiler rooms in Malaysia filled with nothing but people churning out shell corporations in Nevis, the Seychelles, and the like. If the FBI put twenty people to work looking at her vapor trail, she put two hundred foreign agents to work making parallel trails. As many fake programs as Rosalie would write into existence, as many were the Congressmen voting to fund them when the language appeared in their unreadable, multi-thousand-page spending bills.

Rosalie was very angry at her own womanhood. She needed to prove that she was as strong as any man could be, and so she orchestrated the kidnapping of a family raising Ben's son by another woman, a child whose progress in life Ben had kept tabs on. Rosalie orchestrated a twisted scene of sadism and brainwashed sadomasochism upon that family. She found much joy in their suffering. Ben watched it dressed as Santa

Claus on a red velvet chair with gold foiled woodwork. Such were Ben's chair's restraints: the Santa suit was changed once a week where Ben had nowhere else to go to the bathroom. Rosalie tortured that family for a full year. During that time, the man and the woman, the two boys (one of whom was Ben's son), and a girl all lost their arms at the elbow and their legs at the knee. Then she made the five family members into a human pe dey-peder by sewing them together and having them locomote on the cooperation of stumps. While Rosalie began slowly drilling Ben's feet, the family was a lumbering creature wandering around the smallish dungeon. Ben's son was at the head, but Rosalie said, "But you're the real head of the family ain'tya, Ben?" She promised Ben that he would take his place at the head of the family soon enough.

Ben died when Rosalie was thirty-nine. Then she moved out to a small mountain cabin built over a secret entrance to a large underground installation. The clandestine facility was converted for new secret programs, and therein the Congress funded several programs controlled by Rosalie. At that time, Rosalie was the de facto commander of the psychic program because of her unique position in the federal money, and also her unique position in the data system. The two positions were intimately connected. Through the latter, Rosalie maintained her position in the former.

The permissions of the user IDs controlled by Rosalie were such that no one had access to the innermost plain text data files of the USA psychic program except she herself. She had the feds thinking there were ten thousand psy-warriors warring under the mountain, but more than ninety-five hundred were fake identities Rosalie used to manipulate the government. In accordance with the way she inserted a problem into Ben's file, a problem which would have been cleared up as outrageous if not for the assassination of Ben's organization during the lock-out, Rosalie also inserted fake personnel into the payroll of her fake organization such that she protected her own identity as the source of certain psychic information.

Rosalie's psychic torture programs expanded greatly in the new mountain facility. Rosalie always regretted how fast the end came for Ben and his bastard, and she never let herself make that mistake again. She contemplated the many square miles of underground catacombs beneath her mountain. She silently lamented, *I could have brought them here!* It hadn't been clear to her, at that time, that she was going to have free reign over the magnificent mountain complex. However, that was how it came to be.

Rosalie arranged to have all death row inmates in the United States of America given non-lethal poisons at the time of their mock public executions. They awoke under the mountain. She accumulated her subjects in other ways as well. When Rosalie sowed lies inside her dungeon to create the context of her PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH, she described the surface level where she kept her cabin as heaven. She never admitted that she lived there, that she knew how to get there, or had ever been to heaven. In various disguises and over the years, Rosalie programmed her underground victims to believe they were in the afterlife. Her staff took copious notes regarding the responses of the mostly male population to various stimuli administered under Rosalie's ill-disposed sociology.

After illegal immigrants started arriving in Rosalie's dark domain, there was a time when she was sucking eight to twelve dicks a day. In certain instances, Rosalie would introduce men to the purgatory level of her dungeon with fellatio. Near climax, Rosalie would slurp at the fountain of arterial blood after biting the head off. Although her diet was strongly sanguivorous during her fifth decade, Rosalie regularly enjoyed mushroom ravioli. Rosalie cooked with decreasing amounts of mushrooms until none at all were needed for the sans mushroom dish she called mushroom ravioli *glans* mushrooms. Many of those men enjoyed the relative mercy of a quick death and never left her administrative level. Those who were not so lucky left for her purgatory level. Those who were most unlucky left for what Rosalie told them was hell.

When Rosalie was forty-eight years old, she told herself that she was being a good woman to slave away making mushroom ravioli for the men that didn't really deserve to be going through the torture experience Rosalie wrought beneath the mountain. Sometimes she would cut their necks to bathe in showers of their blood.

When Rosalie sent someone to hell, she sometimes dragged them by rope through some sinister peder-creature that might have involved hippopotami. When a man was pulled all the way through, he fell into her monstrously jumbo toilet bowl. The bowl was thirty feet across and four feet deep with raw sewage and sewage water. From the urinary tract cut in the five-foot-wide lip of the comically massive toilet seat high above, a seat in the style of a commercial toilet bowl seat as opposed to the residential toilet bowl seat which is not generally known to have a urinary tract breaking the seat's ringlike topology, Rosalie heckled each man. "Ha! You wanna live like a piece of shit? Congratulations! Now you are one."

Rosalie flayed the men before she used the pulley to put them in the big toilet where nasty cartoonish diarrhea stains ran down the imitation moldy porcelain basin. The chemicals in the feces-infested toilet bowl in the base's sewage treatment facility soaked into the men's bodies as they lay like logs floating skinned in the big bowl. Rosalie called it pickling them. It was only one of the things she did for the first step of the descent into hell that was simulated for the purposes of her "much-needed" and highly-funded PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH.

In the deeper levels, the creatures mostly agreed that being a pickled piece in the toilet was only for the lucky ones.

# 42

AFTER all the pigs at Berserk Hold were dead, the prisoner, the captain, the bosun, the samurai, and the rest congregated in Berserk Hold's lecture theater. The captain wanted the prisoner to come back to The Grim Ghost 2, but the prisoner was dead set on attacking New Snoutistan. The captain told the bosun to write out their options on the chalkboard so they could weigh the pros and cons. The bosun wrote in fancy letters PLANS and underlined it twice. Then he added an extra-fancy asterisk.

Plan one was to go back to the seraphim and head directly back to the ship for immediate withdrawal toward Exland. Plan two was to go to New Snoutistan. Super G assured them they could ride the dragon, but he did not assure them of them of their lives in battle. Plan three would have been to wait at Berserk Hold while Super G attacked the city, possibly with the aid of the paladin. Afterward, they would reconvene at Berserk Hold where the rest would wait. The captain told the bosun not to bother scribing a third option. He said, "We're not splitting up. No way. Don't even write that."

While the captain made his case to Super G (who was not forthcoming at all in his subscriptions to the captain's rhetorical devices), the bosun sketched a seraph and made a rough map covering the relevant locales.

Super G said to Captain Atlas, “Why do you want to go back to The Grim Ghost 2? What was the point of bringing that wheel with you, ay?” The wheel was in the meadow where the drawbridge’s woodwork once pressed on the soil then covered by the wheel’s wood.

The captain said, “It’s just that the creation of the new ship in the derealizer was highly irregular, and we can’t be sure everything is shipshape on ye oldie Grim Ghost 2. I’ve never heard o’ anything like it anyway.”

The bosun said the same. “Narr dee! Never seen nothing of no such sorts at any time er place. Narr, not never!”

The captain lifted an eyebrow to solicit the other sailors’ input.

Jim Bobson said, “The derealization was highly irregular, to say the least, Captain.”

Gronk said, “N— N— No, Captain.”

Nkromo said, “A ship within a ship? Why build ships at all? Aye, why?”

None of them had ever heard of anything like The Grim Ghost 2’s manifestation, but none of them were certified in derealization either. The prisoner told the captain that the replicator in the cave was working. They could manufacture a dry dock and build a new ship with the dragon’s help. The prisoner crouched to draw on the chalkboard. On the bosun’s map, he made a sketch of the dragon hiking to the sea with prefabricated timbers.

The captain said, “You gotta be kiddin’ me!”

Super G said. “I am not. I can set it up in front of the castle with some collapsible loaders. You’d be surprised how fast Draghor can gather enough wood for the best ship you can imagine. The software’s already loaded, ay. There’s probably a library of great sailing ships.”

The captain said, “So you’re telling me that you have a thing that I can feed it trees and it will give me the spine of a ship?”

Super G said, “I imagine it’s probably better to print the parts of the spine, then have Draghor bring them down to the



dry dock, and then assemble the spine and the whole ship down there.” He pointed a foot-long golden finger at the little dry dock drawn next to the bosun’s seraph.

The captain was beside himself with joy. He said, “Of course it is!” After that, the captain agreed to the prisoner’s plan to send them into New Snoutistan. The captain had no leverage with which to coerce his oddly skeletal, super-sized Ascendant passenger. The captain’s charismatic charm did not convince the prisoner to leave his land, and the captain thought it was good that the kernel of truth should not be swayed so easily.

The captain said, “I don’t want to split up.”

Super G said, “Captain, I promise you. You will have no problem with these fake documents.”

In the end, the captain conceded for a quick side trip regarding Berserkevich’s fate. The captain and the bosun would go into New Snoutistan for news of Berserkevich. Then they would attack the city. If the day was theirs, then construction would begin on the new ship right away. Draghor would remain on the outskirts. They would be in and out.

The captain asked if the ship could be built in a year.

Super G said, “I’m thinking weeks. Months, maybe. Depends what kind of prefab connector pieces we can cook up.”

The captain had a vision in his mind of hammering dowel rods until the ship was built, but Super G said, “Prepare to be amazed, Captain.” Then he told the captain about micromechanical adhesion.

The prisoner wanted the paladin to go into New Snoutistan, but the paladin, like the captain, was leery of parting ways with the prisoner. Super G told the paladin, “There’s no scoundrels of the Vassalry in New Snoutistan these days. You won’t be noticed.”

The paladin said, “I’ll not go sneaking back in. I was in Emerald Station for three years. And if you fall,” the paladin told the captain, “then I’ll be in reserve with the dragon.” It was understood that the paladin did not favor the prisoner’s

plan to breed the worms out of the pigs.

The paladin asked the prisoner if he had the Amulark of Zarganthos.

The prisoner said, "I do."

The paladin said, "Give it to me."

In accordance with the Covenant of the Propagation of the Amulark of Zarganthos, the prisoner undid the longer silver chain that held the much smaller chain and Amulark.

The paladin looked into the Amulark and the paradox of the unrolling circular square. He fished it out on the tip of his tentacle and pitched his length so that the four-foot tube of holy steel covering his back was at forty-five degrees to the floor. He set the paradox betwixt his eyes, and it went into him. There was no spectacular change in the light, but the paladin knew his powers were greatly increased.

The bosun said to himself, "I may as well have it back then." Then he said more loudly, "Mr. Zorolo, do you have the Amulark of Zarganthos?"

Zorolo da Vinci said, "I do."

"Give it to me."

The paladin gave it to him, and the bosun put the fine platinum-palladium chain around his neck.

The Amulark changed hands five times in quick succession. In the end, the prisoner kept it. He said, "How about I hold onto it while we're in New Snoutistan?"

The High Council of the Paladins of Gaia considered the Ballad of Zarganthos lost. It didn't come up that the prisoner and the bosun had both read it. The bosun was something of an expert on Zarganthos. It was unthinkable to the skeleton and the man that the cuttlefish hadn't read it, and it was unthinkable to the cuttlefish in reverse.

Once, a paladin in another part of the universe posed two questions to a Guild Knight who had, by serendipity, come into possession of the Amulark of Zarganthos. The paladin, Reflectico da Tripoli, said, "Do you have the Amulark of Zarganthos?"

The knight said, "I do."

Reflectico da Tripoli said, "Will you give it to me?"

The knight said, "I think not."

The paladin, not from among the ranks of the High Council by any means, attacked the knight for what he saw as a breach of Zarganthean terms and conditions. The Ballad of Zarganthos, lost in Gaia, required that the Amulark be demanded. The paladin killed the knight and brought the Amulark to Gaia. The end result of the dispute (in which the Gaians were unknowingly out of line) was the operational suspicion in Gaia that the Guild of the Greater Good was working with or had been subverted by the Dark Mage. The prisoner ran his silver chain through the platinum-palladium chain of the Amulark of Zarganthos and placed it at his neck bones. Then they departed for the beach forthwith.

Richard saw the dragon's tail disappear into the lower canyon while he and the women who would be his four wives descended on Berserk Hold from higher in the mountains. They found the lecture hall where the bosun's map was drawn alongside what had been described as plan one and plan two during deliberation. In the memory of Richard's children, options one and two were taken as steps one and two of a single option. The first step was simple enough. Go back to the seraphim, go to the ship. The five Ascendant humans had been to the seraphim and to a ship, and getting back there made sense. However, when the prisoner first donned the Amulark of Zarganthos, the seraphim began to fall away. By the time the captain and the bosun entered New Snoutistan, the seraphim were gone from that planet forever. The seraphim became the secret religious knowledge of the people populated by Richard's descendants.

Plan two surprised Richard. Its diagram showed a skeletal dragon hauling a ship on its back. He said, "I told you! I did see it!" He pointed excitedly to the prisoner's depiction of Draghor.

His wives to be, just five days out from Braido Goran's

farm, had erroneously thought he was hallucinating. They were glad to know he was not losing his grip on reality. Richard seemed very strong to them in the theater when they discovered the notes on the debate of the departed party.

Plan two had enough written about how to use the replicator that Richard and his wives were able to find the replicator in the cave and run it in their lifetimes. Where the prisoner had scrawled *SUPG\_BZRK/HOME> startx* on the chalkboard made all the difference. Richard was using the replicator in mere months. The demo software on the laptop walked him through it step by step.

Berserk Hold spawned a spacefaring race that went on to colonize many other planets. Richard's children were healthy, and brain worms did not afflict those good fruits sown at Berserk Hold. His children multiplied, eventually, beyond the Hold and even beyond the entire planet. Richard's children retained the knowledge of the memory of the seraphim. For centuries, the plans remained undisturbed in the Hold's lecture theater. Before the last lingering flakes of chalk fell as dust, plan one and plan two were transcribed a thousand times. Search as they might, no one on that planet ever found the long line of lion ladies.

The religion of that planet was centered on, first, getting to the seraphim and, second, using the dragon to carry the ship so that the people could stay away from the old ways. The old ways were in the memories of Richard, Fátima, Anne, Alexandra, and Yessica. Life on that planet was a paradise for a long time. By the time the Hold's fusion generator conked out, the descendants of the Ascendant were already manufacturing new ones. Although they never found the seraphim that were the first step of their religion, they did build dragons that would carry ships across the sky.

The planet of Richard and his wives eventually fell under the shadow of the Eternal Enemy. Happy life turned bitter, and there was a time when not one pig on that planet ate clean food. Before the planet fell to the pigs, a galactic exploration

mission was launched. Mega ships constructed in orbit were filled with power pack and replication terraforming technology. The armada colonized nine planets and brought them all to spacefaring self-sufficiency before the home world, Seastarsera, fell to the Dark Lord. Those planets had constituted the Riccardian Empire of Planets. Nine was the largest federation of planets ever achieved by the ark mission to seed the stars with a wholesome humanity thriving throughout space and time.

When the world upon which Berserk Hold was set fell to the Dark Lord, the other eight planets fell in quick succession. A thousand years beyond the fall of Seastarsera, all nine planets were swine-ridden hellholes. Before the final planet fell, however, the space armada constructed by Richard's descendants had already departed for a tenth planet.

Admiral Bick was Richard's descendant mainly through Fátima, and he was in command of the Armada when it reached the planet known as Quaoar. (Richard's children were mostly married to the plainspeople, not pigs, that could be found at the end of Super G's lesser trail.) On Quaoar, the men and women of the Armada populated the planet and explored the stars.

When another habitable planet was detected long after arriving on Quaoar, the terraforming armada engaged their hyperdrives and made the long journey. When they reached Carbin, the eleventh planet seeded by the mission forged by Richard's descendants, Quaoar had not fallen to the pigs but was destroyed in the nuclear exchange that repelled them. Across five more planets, the armada stayed just abreast of the Eternal Enemy's minions. The armada nursed planets to self-sufficiency and explored the stars for other worlds to further colonize. Within centuries of each departure, pigs were working, dark agents were sowing brain worms, and the progress was usurped. With uncanny timing, the previous planets fell, but the armada always escaped. Word seldom came to the armada from the trail of colonies. The pigs were biting at the heels of

humanity.

Around the twentieth planet, Admiral Ludoviggo, primarily Richard's descendant through Anne, was able to initiate a Second Riccardian Empire of Planets across three planets. However, the Eternal Enemy would not relent. The creep of evil crept over the Second Riccardian Empire of Planets until only pigs remained, all under the spell of the Eternal Enemy. Before Fourfather fell, the inhabitants of the capital of the Second Riccardian Empire of Planets used massive 3D printing technology to build eight great gemstones across their blue and green world, monoliths under its white clouds. Eight great cities were built around impossibly large gems which bathed their cities in all the colors of the rainbow, and one with the sparkle of diamonds.

One hundred and fifty-nine times, the forward mission of the press of human vitality forged life where there was none. One hundred and fifty-nine times, the Eternal Enemy's porcine forces followed and defeated the humans. While the crew of the Armada was free of brain worms, there was a persistent toe fungus. It got on Richard's toes while he was in the sty at Braido Goran's farm. It lived on their skin with its malicious nature undetected at Berserk Hold. The non-itching, latent fungus went undetected as it became part of the skin biome of the population of Seastarsera. The fungus went with them through space when the Seastarserrans set sail in the space armada. When their own children divided into the groups of those who would stay with the armada and those who would stay with the new planet, the fungus went onto the soil. It sank onto the land. It washed into the water and went worldwide. The fungus acted like a homing beacon for the slaves digging tunnels at the outer reaches of the Jiganthemum Jibode.

# 43

WHEN Rosalie was thirty-three years old, she thought of herself as a seasoned field agent. She was a regular in diplomatic circles where she plucked morsels from the minds of men and women in high society.

Problems arose on a certain South American operation. Rosalie authorized a kidnapping. The local government's raid, reported as botched, was not botched. Everyone was killed. Rosalie got out and never went to South America again. She caused a major diplomatic incident that led to a whole mess of people getting killed who were meant to be immune from cartel violence. There were murders. There was torture. The investigators that came later never uncovered the real identity of one Ambrosia Malcorova.

Supposedly the War on Drugs' most secret, highest level undercover operation *against* drug violence, Rosalie ran the largest cocaine operation in North America. When the South American distributor wouldn't agree to decline business from Rosalie's competitors, Rosalie's contractors kidnapped the judge's daughter. She absconded with the daughter to her mountain complex before things went sour. Before it all went sour, she sent videos of the daughter sexually assaulted by the vile things Rosalie made among the subjects of her research

regarding rape. She picked away bits of the girl's flesh and attempted to ensnare the girl's energies in an ultra-classified psychic battery. When the parties relevant to her extortion and schemes were wiped out, Rosalie was left with a mostly flayed and broken little girl.

Rosalie filmed herself cutting away bits of flesh from the girl. She covered her own face on camera. The true identity of the person later identified as Ambrosia Malcorova was never learned. During the investigation, the Congress dispatched the agents of their inquiry to the converted silo where Ben and Rosalie worked. At that time, Rosalie was thirty-five.

Ben studied the material, and it was immediately obvious to him that Rosalie was Ambrosia. When he responded, he wrote in his report that he could be absolutely certain that no one based at his facility was involved in any such shenanigans. Ben gave his solemn oath affirming an unequivocal denial. The entire federal kidnapping program was based in that silo, and Ben's fraudulent affidavit was respected.

The whole South American ruckus started when Rosalie improperly authorized the kidnapping, and then the response was much more severe than anticipated. That left Rosalie with one whimpering creature, the judge's daughter, and an idea.

At home, Ben said to Rosalie, "Stop lying! I know it was you. How could it have been anyone but you?"

Rosalie gave up. She said, balling, "How was I supposed to know he was the count's nephew?!"

Ben might have said, "You can't bring random people into that sick carnival you've got going on down there, woman! We have protocols in place for a reason." What he did say was, "It was a tough call, Rosie. I know. C'mere." Rosalie sat on his lap in front of the unburning fireplace. In time, Ben said, "You're going to have to resign. I can cover this up for you, but this is the second time your bad judgment has come back on us in a big way. You gotta go, sugar."

Rosalie protested for fifteen minutes or more. In the playful banter of husband and wife, she acquiesced. She said,



“Well... Maybe I can paint the house?”

Ben said, “You can do a whole renovation thing like on those shows you like.”

Rosalie thought about it and said, “You’re the best, love. I love you.”

When a second empty bottle graced the first, Ben said, “Did you really have one of those rape monsters rape that girl?”

Inside her mind, Rosalie smiled with sinister satisfaction. She did a lot worse than that. She said, “You know what, Ben? I did.” She slurred her words on purpose like a lousy lush. She said, “And I’d do it again, too. Those cartel people doan unnerstan’ nothin’ ‘cept pain.”

“No you won’t. You’re fired, hot shot.”

Rosalie prodded him for home renovation ideas.

“Did you really cut that girl’s toes off?”

Rosalie did a lot worse than that. She was immensely smug to see that her edits had made it onto Ben’s desk. She said, “I did, Ben. So what?”

Ben laughed and said, “You’re one sick bitch, Rosie.”

“But I’m your sick bitch, Ben.”

“Ain’t that the truth!”

“You know you love me.”

Ben said, “I guess so, I married ya,” and kissed her on the lips.

# 44

WHEN Rosalie was seventy-one years old, she was no longer the champion of the mushroom ravioli contest in her mushroom ravioli club. No longer did she feast mainly on blood. She had taken to eating strips of meat barbecued with salad. For a decade, Rosalie's coven of witches feasted in the ravioli contest, and Rosalie won each year. The ladies of the coven said Rosalie was, in the words of Rachel Wronthurkin, "really capturing the essence of the man," in her signature mushroom ravioli *glans* mushrooms dish. One penis made four raviolis. Rosalie quartered them.

When Rosalie was seventy-one, the President of the United States of America was a fictitious persona she herself had created in her forties. Rosalie watched the mutilated, brainwashed slave address the American people on her portable telephone. The electronic voice box implanted in the creature's nasal cavity read the brain waves of the partially lobotomized thing propped up on artificial legs clipped into black leather shoes. The animatronics in the latex mask over the creature's faceless, degloved head sold a convincing lie of traditional morality to the American people. The creature motioned with robotic yet convincingly lifelike hands. The creature's own arms below the elbow were splayed along the radius and ulna leaving a Y-shape.

Rosalie said, “Congratulations, Mr. President,” to an empty room filled with a dozen or more hidden recording devices. They surveilled her but did not hear her. Unknown to anyone, Rosalie herself was doing all of the anonymization processing of the raw data in the feeble efforts to investigate her. She never fully put the whole dataset out there. The agencies who thought they had all the pieces were deluded. The other agencies of the federal government of the United States of America, those besides Rosalie’s several fake agencies, pursued investigations under the false assumption that all of the data was out there. Their faulty operating premise was that the known agencies were defrauding each other, not that they were secretly defrauded by secret agencies of which they were unaware. The agencies investigated each other under the assumption that some agency, somewhere, was withholding secret data, but none of the legitimate agencies ever considered the possible existence of fake agencies high up in data stream, and certainly not above them in the data stream where Rosalie was.

The presidential pretender was brought to Rosalie as a twenty-year-old Mexican immigrant going through deportation. He was diverted into Rosalie’s program. After years of torture and brainwashing, he became an FBI agent via Rosalie’s program of creating false personae in the federal registries. She could do this with permissions allowed to certain of her credentials inherited from Ben and lost in the melee of her evil.

Rosalie’s agency relied heavily on theatrical disguises to infiltrate the federal bureaucracy of the United States of America. All across the nation, demented slave creatures marched into clandestine (and public) offices on prosthetic legs and under latex masks, sometimes ones with added animatronic emotivity. Rosalie was not just the commander of the psychic forces; she was the de facto commander of the United States of America Corporation.

Three weeks after the inauguration, Rosalie attended a garden party where they had mushroom ravioli and watched sadistic videos. They were celebrating not just her victory in the

Presidential contest but also Rosalie's Congressional testimony on the Friday preceding that Sunday brunch. A long table along the side of the urban fenced front yard, a yard that was somehow spacious and tight at the same time, held the tied body of the daughter of a political foe protected by the previous President's administration. The caterer serving the women took care to slice pieces of meat without causing fatal bleeding. The ladies complimented the gagged face of terror clad on the girl's tearful eyes of insanity. The coven women and other women at the party picked pieces of flesh off the terrified girl with chopsticks. The girl flailed and flopped as she could in the tight cotton cord, but to no avail. They ate the flesh raw and used a small fondue pot to deep fry the snibbets of the girl's soft legs.

On the Friday preceding that Sunday, disguised as Dr. David Russelwicz, Rosalie assured the Congress that the facility at the heart of the scandal inquiry had engaged in no serious torture. Dr. Russelwicz said in the testimony, "The terrorism suspects come out of there having undergone nothing worse than a bad dream. We do enhanced interrogations, it is true, and I can't get into the specifics with regards to intelligence methods, but are they frightened? Yes. They should be, approximately one hundred percent of them are terrorists." Zero percent of the men in Rosalie's programs were terrorists. Rosalie let the real agencies handle the real terrorists, but she was not universally known to make all the intelligence regarding real terrorists known to the real agencies.

Rosalie was in the catbird seat. Embedded for forty years, Rosalie's enemies had stood, and she gunned them down. Most of the time, an actual gunning would have been far better than what they got. Rosalie's victims cowered and begged, and she hurt them anyway. When Rosalie assumed the role of David Russelwicz for the Congress that day, she was able to use a loophole based on her own research regarding male to female sex mutilation surgery. Rosalie's research with the penis eating clown showed that torturing a man's testicles and penis, and

the rest of him too, was allowed by the law because the pain and suffering did not, in hindsight, exceed that typical of a bad dream or uncomfortable hallucination. Her documents proved it. One could make them believe it was a dream.

The prisoner killed Rosalie when she was seventy-two years old.

# 45

THE last time Rosalie ever felt like a young woman, the last time that is, until she woke one day in a shabby inn over the land behind the Port of Higher Calls, was when she was sixty years old. She was coked out of her mind giving a testimonial for non-medically necessary amputations. It was the second year of her addiction. Rosalie spent that last honest moment of vivacious vim in a seminar recruiting professional women that wore latex disguises for clandestine work to get their legs amputated so they could do a wider breadth of disguises.

On stilts covered with latex molding, Rosalie whooshed around the corporate classroom. She proclaimed, “I mean, honestly, do these look like the legs of a forty-nine year-old woman?” Rosalie wore the molded legs of a thirty year-old jogger: no varicose veins, no cellulite, no shaving. The exclusively female class complimented her.

Rosalie went to great pains to consecrate the abomination. She had gone so far with her self-mutilation that she could roam freely under the mountain of her Inferno indistinguishable from the creatures that roamed and suffered. She would crawl on the floor with her leg stumps, and she wore latex stumps over her hands so her hands didn’t get dirty as she crawled through the ungodly abomination. On different lev-

els of her dungeon, Rosalie played the part of her victims' fellow mutilatee. She guided the lore of the dungeon in a way that only one with the keys to the dungeon could. She enjoyed hearing the lies that her prisoners came to believe. The self-generating dungeon gossip supplemented her own lies.

At the deepest corner of Rosalie's converted complex, which was still finite at that time and not connected to the Jigantemum Jibode, was a pit filled with the worst of the worst. The sump seethed with the *crème de la crème* of the vileness of Rosalie's scorn. When she dredged that filth, she descended to the lower levels in an armored vehicle. On the lowest level, which was almost entirely dark with only a few thirty-watt bulbs spaced over three miles, Rosalie crawled toward the pit. She was not afraid. All the creatures down there were lobotomized, or they recognized her as a dungeon fixture. The way to the pit was bottlenecked with narrow hatches and unreachable but on foot or stump. Rosalie sensed in the dark other things chained to the walls, and she savored the magnitude of her exaltation when she held such dominion over so many masculine slaves. At the pit, Rosalie lowered a bucket and brought it up.

Rosalie had mastered the dark art of ling-chi: death by a thousand cuts. She could cut and cut and cut, and keep on cutting until all the life essence was squeezed into the vagus nerve in the neck. Normally a small flash of life energy would dissipate in the moment of death. Beneath the mountain, Rosalie learned how to trap that energy in the nerve tissue. When a creature was pared down to nothing but a soul on a barbecue skewer, Rosalie often had them brought down to the deepest depths. The darkest, most dreadful, and most sorrowful energies of the lingering death were a warning to those who might wander too far in Rosalie's house of horrors. When the old creatures' flesh stopped living and yet still retained the energy of the soul, Rosalie's personnel policy was that the remaining bits of flesh should be thrown into the pit. Rosalie knew no one came to the bottom level on Sunday, so she made a

schedule to slink with her broth from the pit to the elevator every Sunday.

Some creatures that she'd trained to think of themselves as cats accompanied her from the elevator. The elevators in Rosalie's complex were big enough to move the dump trucks that mined the caverns, and so Rosalie left her own vehicle in the elevator when she trekked to the pit. All once men, the creatures in the sick and filthy cat costumes slunk in the shadows. Their arms and legs were stumps for sure, but Rosalie wasn't the only woman sending cats to hell. Who knew what foul thing lie covered under which nasty tattered costume? Rosalie's staff did, that's who. If they were good kitties, then the staff would put them in new costumes. There were no new duds for bad kitties. It was a game, turning men into cats. It was a game much treasured by the women of Rosalie's coven. The cats hated to be dirty, and the cats on the lowest level were sent down for permanent dirt detail.

Mushroom ravioli asked, "Who can use the worst brain-washing torture to turn the hardest man into the meekest pussy cat?" Their psychological torture was as sadistic as it was brutal and malicious. Even when the men were conditioned to a state of skittish feline insanity, they were lobotomized too. Any parts of the brain that couldn't contribute to the skittish feline insanity had to go.

When Rosalie told that room full of spies about how great it was to amputate one's legs for a life of next-level clandestine adventure, the women honestly believed that there was a demand for covert agents who could change their height by as much as several inches. There was no such need. Rosalie's amputation program grew out of her research regarding men who amputate their penises. The class that day was comprised solely of over-fifty women, but Rosalie reveled most greatly when strong young men sacrificed their limbs for her.

"Atta boy, soldier," Rosalie would gloat alone after she talked a perfectly healthy man into cutting his legs off.



Through the mingling of her programs, she was able to advertise the self-mutilation as a Navy SEAL program for ultra-high-end undercover operators. Not only that, but Rosalie often saw to it that these people were dispatched for work at precisely their former height, and they never did quite get the gist of why they'd done it. Prosthetics technology was very advanced at that time.

On the day that those middle-aged women heard Rosalie's spiel about the cutting-edge exciting life of life on stilts among the next generation of super spies, the judge's daughter was already completely mutilated and under the cover of a latex disguise as a fellow seminar attendee. Under her sensible navy skirt and leggings, her legs were prostheses. Her hands were entirely prosthetic as well. The judge's daughter, who Rosalie had rechristened Fanny, played it off perfectly.

Fanny played secret second salesman in the room full of women. Fanny saw her god in front of the classroom. Rosalie had cut past the ankle by the time Fanny's family got the axe in South America.

When Rosalie was thirty-three years old, she kept torturing the girl in an offhand way, but there was no one to send the videos to. She didn't want to kill the girl, but there was a controversial person in her dungeon, and Rosalie didn't know what to do about it. At that time, in her youth, Rosalie always wore disguises in the dungeon which were character costumes authentic from Disney Land, Disney World, or Disney Japan or Euro Disney. Often times Snow White, Rosalie put on other, more sinister disguises if she intended to do more than move about in her dungeon. She traveled with a team of armed men. Eventually, Rosalie was able to teach the inhabitants of her hell that she was simply one of those dungeon terrors best to be avoided. Her prisoners were told they were in the afterlife. Rosalie had distinct levels for purgatory and hell. There was a heaven far up above somewhere, and Rosalie filled many upward-winding passageways with her twisted fantasies.

When Rosalie was forty, she stopped torturing Fanny who

mostly languished in the darkness and tried to hide from the things that lurked in the dark. Rosalie had never cracked the girl's mind with the worst of her psychological theatrics. When Rosalie was about to send her with a new batch into the lobotomy program, she thought of a new torture. Rosalie spared the girl the lobotomy and allowed her to be rescued and adopted by a family.

Rosalie saw to it that the family got everything they needed. Fanny was twenty years old and in pain, but not broken, when the foster family took her faceless, limbless body and glittering angry eyes. Rosalie saw that the family was provided with advanced cosmetics including latex masks to cover the deformities that Rosalie herself wrote on her slave. Fanny began to walk on prosthetics and lived free in the world for ten years.

When Rosalie was fifty, she sent her agents to interview Fanny. They told her that they were looking into the network that does the things that were done to Fanny. Eventually, Fanny was recruited into one of Rosalie's programs as an agent with the sorely mistaken understanding that she was aligning herself against her own torturer. Rosalie fed Fanny nothing but lies and used her against the interests that had been her family's own. Fanny could wear the mask of any face. She could be any height. The voice box implanted in her nasal cavity could play any voice. Fanny extended Rosalie's reach in the government by playing an assortment of fictitious characters that Rosalie could create but not necessarily impersonate. Fanny killed three people while disguised as an FBI agent.

When Rosalie was sixty-eight years old, she schlepped along the floor of the lowest level under the mountain, all the way to her pit. Half her face was peeled away. With rancid, monstrous prosthetic stumps over her hands, and with her natural leg stumps on the dirty tunnel floor, Rosalie dredged up the filth of her fornications. Among the many places it would go, on the following day Fanny would be an FDA inspector pouring a vial of vile homeopathy into the vats at a major food processor. Rosalie put it in cocaine, sometimes in proportion that

was not even remotely homeopathic. She distributed the cursed powder through her mushroom ravioli club.

Rosalie's plan was to dredge up that whole pit, one day, with a suction pump and poison everything on Earth all at once. Just a pinprick with a pin set halfway into a drop of the miserable mire could make a sane man mad in moments. Rosalie had the people in the government to allow it, but she yet worked on getting non-federal people on the ground who could actually poison the whole country or world in one synchronized action. She was working on it... and getting there.

When Rosalie was fifty-six, she kidnapped the niece of the judge's daughter for no reason. When the girl awoke, Fanny was in the room, undisguised. Rosalie told Fanny that the girl was the daughter of the man that had done to her what was truly done by Rosalie. Fanny was a sad monster, but she did not have the anger in her heart to torture the girl.

Rosalie said, "What did we bring you on for? It was for this moment! If we wanted some pansy ass little Nancy then we could have gotten anyone, Fanny! But we got you. You, Fanny. You. Were. Made. For. This."

Fanny croaked in her unmodulated voice, "I don't want to hurt her."

Rosalie guilted Fanny with lies about her parents. Rosalie said Fanny was letting them down and letting the country down. After all, it was the country that covered her face in lifelike masks. It was the country that gave her arms and legs like a real person. In the end, Rosalie pulled out a crack pipe, and they smoked crack cocaine. Fanny became highly stimulated and did in that room what she believed was her duty. Fanny did have a mindless place of hate where she could go. Fanny used a blow torch to roast the girl's toes before she toothlessly nibbled the toe meats from their bones. That was what Fanny did for starters. What Fanny did was only starters what Rosalie's man did later. That man was well known in South America. He sent a video.

# 46

PEQUOD Pfeffermickle was forty-nine years old when Rosalie's organization kidnapped him. After he resisted political pressure to look the other way in a far-reaching investigation at the FDA, Rosalie snatched him. He woke strapped to a chair and with ocular specula prising open his eyes. Rosalie's agent was with him. He could not look away. The TV showed a rolling road in Pequod's neighborhood. Rosalie's agent whipped his testicles with the cheap sex shop novelty whip. It was excruciating to Pequod.

Rosalie's agent said, "Watch this. This is going to be great." Out on the surface of the Earth where Pequod would never set foot again, a deranged dungeon thing wore Pequod's face rendered in latex. With a microcamera embedded in its eye, it pulled down the sun visor in Pequod's Mercedes Benz, winked in the small mirror, and walked the driveway before Pequod's home. The creature smiled at its reflection over the clean glass panes set in Pequod's front door.

Pequod's wife appeared in the kitchen making dinner. The creature gurgled some malicious slur and cursed the woman in the nonsense tongue of Rosalie's dungeon. The voice modulating module in the creature's nasal cavity emitted out-of-phase sound waves to cancel the thing's disgusting noises. In-

stead, it played Pequod's voice for the woman. Pseudo-Pequod said, "Whatcha cookin', babe?"

Pequod thrashed violently. Rosalie's agent laughed at him on the other end of the television circuit. She whipped his testicles again.

Pseudo-Pequod enacted a scene of carnality, and Pequod's wife was taken in the kitchen. The wife said, "Peakie! What's come over you?"

Pseudo-Pequod did have an animatronic mockery of Pequod's penis between his legs, but he did not use it when he bent the wife over the kitchen island. At first, the wife received Pseudo-Pequod face to face as she sat on the edge of the island. Pequod watched his wife ravaged with uncharacteristic roughness, roughness Rosalie's profile showed would not be questioned by Pequod's latently lusty wife. Rosalie's agent laughed and whipped Pequod's testicles again.

When Pseudo-Pequod turned the wife around, he used his thumb to open a seam in the latex pubic hair. It produced a phallic thing. Pseudo-Pequod made sure to take its measure for the camera before he took Pequod's wife from behind. The member that penetrated Pequod's wife was like a scorpion's fore half. Before it went inside, Pequod saw the scorpion's face and mouth parts milling for the camera with insectile fervor. What that thing was, he never knew. As Pseudo-Pequod pushed into the wife, the scorpion's two arms were folded back and became girth inside her.

She moaned. Afterward, she told Pseudo-Pequod that he felt so big. She said, "There's something different about you, mister." The texture was foreign and strange. Like Rosalie's profile predicted, the wife accepted the anomalous penetration when Pseudo-Pequod gave it to her.

Pseudo-Pequod began molesting Pequod's daughter. When the daughter was going to tell the tale of the abuse, she was kidnapped. Pseudo-Pequod sent live stream videos of himself from the kidnap location, out of costume, even as he continued to impersonate Pequod at home with the grieving wife. The

wife had by then grown quite worried about the state of her husband. In the dungeon, her real husband was worse than she knew.

Rosalie's agent eventually shipped Pequod to the mountain complex code-named SASKATCHEWAN GIGAPLEX. He was dumped in the purgatory area and left to fend for himself. Before he fell down a chute into the hell level, Pequod roamed the middle and upper-middle reaches of the anti-nuclear bunker for five years. In the fourth year, he had taken company with a like-minded band of those whose physical mutilations had not yet begun or had not yet, in any case, deprived a fellow of his humanity.

Rosalie's staff baited the maze. Scratching along the walls in the dark, Pequod and five others made their way toward a rumor of some food. There was a significant amount of medical equipment down in the dungeon keeping things alive that would otherwise die. When the dungeon staff came through, the wise would hide. A wide berth was given. For messing with the staff, so it was said, was a quick ticket to hell.

In the small room where the five hapless men crept, Rosalie unpowered her night vision goggles, set them aside, and waited. Somewhere, a thing made a creeping noise. Rosalie was fifty-six years old.

Pequod said, "Shhh!" The others were silent, but there was a wheeze in the darkness, a persistent wheeze. The five in Pequod's party became totally silent, and Rosalie waited. Her slave had scented Pequod's party, and the creature was on its way. The telltale sound of metal dragging on concrete followed the creeping wheeze.

When Gordon backed up, he went past the door by which he'd entered. It shut silently behind him when he was the last man in. Gordon and the others stood against the walls in total darkness. The sound of the dragging metal was in the room with them, and a smell like rotten meat was over the monstrous wheezing.

The creature closed on Gordon who backed himself into a

corner. Gordon remained still and silent until the last moment. When the wet snout touched his arm, Gordon tried to bolt, but it was too late. The long jaws clamped on his shoulder. The robot arms with their night vision sensors helped the Frankenstein alligator eat Gordon's pieces. The brainwashing of the creature was to kill, not to eat, and the rake of metal on cement circled toward João whose heavy panic breath was bated.

Rosalie said, "Get down. It can't get you on the floor." Indeed, the creature was hardly deadly. It was the upper half of an alligator, five hundred pounds or more, grafted on the flayed torso of a man. Inside the alligator's gullet, there was a small hole where the man could feed in eternal muffled darkness. A metal frame held the alligator up. The six rolling wheels allowed the man's legs and feet to steer the alligator toward their shared food source: the wanderers on the purgatory level.

João knelt. The creature bumped into him several times with the metal bumper around the base of hard rubber wheels. It could not reach João on the ground. The head could only bite at the level of its rolling support cage, and the robot arms did not bend down. The scrape of metal soon cried the creature's exit.

Pequod said, "Who's there?"

Rosalie said, "Who wants to know?"

Pequod said, "You alright, João?"

João said, "Man, that was too close." They only whispered. Silence was the code of the deep. Sounds attracted monsters in the dark. Even loud thoughts could attract the fires of hell beneath Rosalie's mountain. João exhaled, "Caraca."

Milton said to Rosalie, "How did you know?"

Rosalie said, "I heard that guy before, down by the lights." She described the dreadful rolling jungle gym pushed around by the insane cannibal man inside.

Pequod's party exchanged dungeon lore with Rosalie. Rosalie fed them lies. In the darkness, Rosalie said she heard

how to get to heaven and was on her way there. “But I’ve lost my hands and feet, and the going is so slow.”

Something clicked in Pequod’s memory. Years earlier, he’d heard the same thing: “But I’ve lost my hands and feet, and the going is so slow.”

Rosalie had ambushed Pequod’s party once before. At that time, he was with another party of five men, mostly whole. They found some creature, Rosalie, slinking in the darkness. She had saved them with a tip-off in a previous precarious situation. At the first encounter, Rosalie told Pequod’s party about a switch which would deactivate the medicine balls swinging over the narrow balance beam high above the pit of spikes. With the medicine ball hazard deactivated, Pequod and four others made it across. The final man fell. In the well lit room, the trap door of the spikes fell away, and the men knew Justin was on his way to hell. Rosalie lit that room well. While it existed, it was the most brightly lit room beneath the mountain. The pit of spikes tempted or baited her victims to throw themselves below for an easy end, but there was no such end. As a matter of policy, Rosalie didn’t do it like that.

Rosalie joined Pequod’s previous party, which would have been called more properly Terrell’s party. Terrell was the one who had been in the dungeon longest, and he was the leader until Rosalie got him. Within three days of the medicine ball hazard, Terrell disappeared down a chute to hell. Rosalie spent four consecutive days down on that trip. Her acolytes on the surface, those of her fans in the mushroom ravioli club and elsewhere in the nether realms of torture videos, thought she was a real badass for going face to face beneath the mountain.

In the caverns where Rosalie led them, Terrell’s party was captured by some lobotomized agents of the dungeon wearing blue surgical scrubs with pink knee-high galoshes. Pequod and party found themselves in an impossible escape room challenge while Rosalie stole away through the secret shafts to heaven. One by one, the others of Terrell’s party went to hell. The televisions showed Pequod and the others what it was like



in hell. When only Pequod remained, he did, at last, solve the escape room challenge and ran back into purgatory. Pequod didn't run far. Heavy footfalls carried far, and Pequod was wise by then.

So then, years later, Pequod heard the same enticement. Rosalie said, "But I've lost my hands and feet, and the going is so slow."

Pequod heard Rosalie's story about how to get to heaven for the second time. For the second time, Rosalie claimed to be an old man in need of help because the way was fraught with danger and obstacles. In the room with spikes, Pequod saw Rosalie's face. The nose was gone, and the skin over the jaw. The upper and lower lips were gone, and one cheek was gone around an unblinking and milky eye. High above, Rosalie covered her face with latex and contacts. The darkness shrouded her second meet with Pequod Pfeffermickle. The flayed face of Pequod's recollection was neither male nor female. The voice modulator in Rosalie's sinuses sold the old man's phlegmy, wizened voice.

So, on his second encounter with Rosalie, Pequod attacked her. He began to beat her in the darkness, and she was taken completely by surprise. Never before—never deep under the mountain—had Rosalie's confidence game failed. Pequod beat her in the darkness as she fumbled to grasp the revolver next to her hand inside the fake stump. Pequod bashed Rosalie about her face and body. Rosalie was about to lose consciousness when she clasped the grip in her hidden holster. She fired one random, unaimed shot in the dark. It ripped through Pequod's shoulder. Afraid of the firearm, no one followed Rosalie as she slunk into the darkness with her life.

On the command and control level of the Saskatchewan Gigaplex, Rosalie met with Kirstell. Kirstell admired the bruises on Rosalie's face and said, "Wow, that sounds like a close call."

Rosalie said, "I know, right?" She moaned and played into the pain of her busted lip and black eye. The busted lip was

fake. Kirstell was not aware that Rosalie was a totally disfigured individual. She thought Rosalie looked *great* for her age, and *certainly* she never used those last three words. The black eye was very real. Pequod might have killed Rosalie. Her milky eye was surgically removed, and a computer was eventually attached to her optic nerve. In the meeting with Kirstell, Rosalie wore a glass eye twelve days after Pequod mashed her milky one.

The two women drank wine in Rosalie's office. A hidden door in the closet led to a vacuum tube rail line across the sixty miles to Rosalie's cabin on the other side of the mountains. Rosalie and Kirstell commiserated. They discussed international policy positions and mushroom ravioli. When Rosalie took a call, Kirstell flipped through a coffee table book. It was *The History of the Mu Rho Sigma Sorority*, the women's sorority for married college ladies, authored by one Ms. Anus Larceny. Mu Rho Sigma had greatly abetted Rosalie over the years. Many women at mushroom ravioli were MRS ladies.

Kirstell was a hotshot sadist in Rosalie's surface operation. She said, "You know... I went dancing the other day."

"Oh really? Did you have fun?"

"Yeah, it was pretty good. I got drunk and danced. Nothing special. It was pretty nice."

"Well, that's good. You should flaunt it while you got it." Inside, Rosalie wondered if she taunted herself with the double entendre. Rosalie, for her own sake, decided to cut it off when it stopped looking perfectly young.

Kirstell didn't know about Rosalie. She said, "You still got it, mama! You should come out wi' me and my girls some time."

Rosalie, at that time, was never seen on the surface beyond her cabin or the mushroom ravioli club which could convene in the fine homes of many ladies worldwide. Rosalie kept up mushroom ravioli, and she handled the rest from her secret data nexus in the USA's off-the-books psy-war bunker. Rosalie's agents at the agencies kept the bunker agents apprised of

every little thing.

Rosalie said, "I don't know. Some guy is gonna rub his dick on me, and then I'm going to be making mushroom ravioli right there on the dance floor and I probably wouldn't have a colander big enough for all the noodles by the time the cops showed up."

The shrill bitches cackled.

Kirstell said, "You know, that's funny you should even mention that."

"What's that, love?"

"Guys rubbing their dicks you."

"Oh? Do tell."

"Well, I was just trying to shake my booty you know, and I started dancing up on some guy who was standing by himself."

What actually happened was that Kirstell approached the prisoner from the front and spake onto his face with her barfy wine breath. He said, "No, thanks."

When Kirstell recounted it to Rosalie, she said, "So there's this tall guy, you know? Kinda hot. He's at the edge of the dance floor and I start dancing next to him." Kirstell finished her glass of wine, and Rosalie poured her another. She said, "So, I don't know, maybe I bumped him or something, but he was a real jerk about it."

Rosalie said, "Oh my God! What did he do?"

Kirstell said with no remorse or self-conscience, "He shoved me and told me to fuck off!"

"Oh my God! No he didn't!"

"He did! What a jerk?"

"What a pig!"

"What a pig!"

"What a pig."

"Yeah. He was a real pig."

Rosalie shook her head and said, "What a pig," as she sipped her own glass.

The prisoner was polite to the point of not pointing out the chunks of vomit on Kirstell's blouse when she approached

him. At first, he told her, “No, thanks.” When she wouldn’t spew her barf breath in a direction other than straight up his nose, he simply walked away from her. When she saw him ten minutes later, she started shaking her ass and backed up on him real hard. He took three steps before he saw who was pushing him. He said, “Watch out, ya drunk fuckin’ bitch.”

Kirstell didn’t watch out. She tried to grind up on his thigh. The prisoner pushed her away, and the bouncer interceded.

The bouncer said, “Is this man bothering you, ma’am?”

Kirstell said, “Yesh! Mr. Man!!! This fuckin’ rrrapist, Mr. Man, tried a rrrape me in sevenf sevenf sevel.”

The bouncer asked the prisoner to leave the place where he had only agreed to go at the insistence of his friends. Those friends were nowhere to be seen during the mild altercation with Rosalie’s agent.

When Rosalie heard about it, she said, “What a pig. All men are pigs.”

“Are there no more gentlemen?”

Rosalie shook her head knowingly.

Kirstell said, “I’m just lookin’ fer love is all, love.”

Rosalie was greatly flattered by Kirstell’s appropriation of her word. Rosalie said, “You know what?” She used her extensive tentacles, and the prisoner was kidnapped. He was the demonstration dummy in Rosalie’s next ling-chi seminar.

Spared the slowness of the cutting and deconstruction that Rosalie called best practices, the witch made quick work of the prisoner in her wicked workshop. On the fifth day of the seminar, the prisoner’s skin was gone. His legs were gone, almost at the hip. One arm was gone at the elbow, and a skeletal hand hung at the end of the other. Starting with cuticle scissors, Rosalie clipped away the prisoner’s bits and showed the women in her class which tendons and blood vessels to watch out for, and which nerves.

On the fifth day, Rosalie said, “Now ladies, here is where we come to the decisive moment. Are we making slaves, or are we making monsters?” When Rosalie expounded on the

options available to what she called a crafty woman—her buzz word in ling-chi was always *crafty*—she said, “Once you start slicing on the brain, you’re going to restrict the kind of things you can do with your slave. On the other hand, if you want to get him in a state of agony and tears, then I can show you how to put him there and slice away the brain so he stays there forever. Agony and crying. Day in. Day out. All day. Every day. I can show you how to do it!”

Regarding options that Rosalie called extra spicy, on the fifth day she clipped alligator clips onto four tendons exposed under the missing flesh of the prisoner’s remaining arm. With an angle grinder, she sawed off the hand at the thin of the wrist. She clipped on a prosthetic hand and bolted it to the bone. She clipped the tendons onto the prosthesis and then used a cattle prod to encourage the prisoner to demonstrate what the bio-mechanical Rube Goldberg could do. The ladies oohed and ahhed as the prisoner’s spastic thrashing made the fake fingers grasp and flick. Rosalie said to the cooing crowd, “Voilà!” She attached the robot hand in less than five minutes.

Rosalie gave the class a ten-minute recess. Next, she would drill the prisoner’s teeth and use a larger rotary tool to expose the whole sweep of the prefrontal cortex through the grinding off of the front of his skull. She said, “And you don’t have to stop at the teeth, ladies. The sky is the limit when it comes to your creative drilling energy.” She knew her next set of slides would really wow the women.

During the recess, Rosalie got a disturbing phone call. General Byers had picked up some loose ends from Rosalie’s fraud bureaucracy during a military audit at Area 51. On the phone, Rosalie learned that General Byers was under the mountain and calling for everything to go on lockdown. Rosalie was under the mountain as well. The mutilation theater that she used for ling-chi class was in the command and control complex. Rosalie made a half dozen quick calls. Normally, the upper levels were clean, but, being in the middle of ling-chi class, she needed to get rid of the prisoner quick, fast, and in a hurry.

Rosalie said, "How long?"

Carletta said, "They've got their own trucks and they are hauling butt!"

"Where are they now?"

"Around mile marker eleven in the main tunnel."

"Listen, Carletta. There's some, ah, *evidence* in room CC-1032. We need that cleaned up right away. Before the general gets here."

"CC-1032? Gotcha."

"Thanks, love." Rosalie fought to suppress her quaking panic. She rushed to another part of the compound as General Byers' Humvees tore into the deep. Like a drug dealer flushes evidence, the general was certain that Rosalie would do the same.

If an ordinary agent had been dispatched to clear out room CC-1032, he might have had the good sense to put the prisoner into the incinerator. As it was, two of the lobotomized janitorial custodians showed up. The prisoner barked lipless cries. His unblinking, terrified eyes said, "Get me out of here!"

One of the slaves picked up the calico cat costume in the corner of the classroom. He said, "Kitty." It was a prop from day three. The prisoner barked and shook and prised but could not budge in the medical restraints.

The second custodian said, "Huh huh. Kitty."

The prisoner realized there would be no help, and he wailed to heaven.

The first custodian said, "Kitty cat."

The second said, "Mmhmm. Kitty cat."

The two put the prisoner inside the costume. They were very strong, and the prisoner was very weak in the absence of limbs and the affliction of so much disconnected muscle tissue. While the general barreled down on the scene of Rosalie's crimes, the two custodians brought the prisoner down to where the other cats lived near the bottom of the hell level, beneath the worst part of it.

When Rosalie reached her desk, she enacted the breach protocols which were already ready to go. The custodians scanned the prisoner's microchip when they moved him. Such was their programming. When Rosalie did the data dump, she got a warning that the cat lobotomy protocol was violated, and many hundreds of other warnings as well. She ignored the warnings and dumped the data. She never thought about the prisoner again, not until he killed her.

Near Rosalie's office, General Byers was demanding entry to the bunker beyond the innermost blast shield. In her office, Rosalie was sending out feelers for who knew what and when about the general's mission. Rosalie's phone rang after she had stalled an hour. She picked up the red handset from the matching dial-by-number receiver. "Hello?"

The voice said, "Ms. [*Rosalie*], please."

Rosalie said, "Speaking."

"This is Major Rabbit at GCQR-Command. Is General Byers presently on-site with you?"

Rosalie's throat went dry. She said, "Ah—" The instant messenger on her desktop computer gave a small but important message. It was the initials GB followed by three poop emojis. Rosalie said, "Ah... No, Major. There's no General Byers here. You know this is just an administrative complex. Not much goes on here."

Major Rabbit said, "Copy that, Ms. [*Rosalie*]. We seem to have lost contact—" There was some yelling behind the Major. He said, "Copy that, Ms. [*Rosalie*]. Be advised, we may be sending some inspectors your way."

"Oh! I hope everything is ok. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Ah, copy that, ma'am. Please—" Yelling on the line drowned out the major's voice for a moment. He said, "Stand by."

"Well, this sounds serious, love. Is there anything I should know? Hello? Hello?" The line was dead. "Hello?" Rosalie

went down to greet the general. She had her agent make excuses for the long wait.

The agent said, "Security, general, you know. We don't get many pop inspections around here."

General Byers said, "We get plenty of bullshit out my way. Where the fuck is this [*Rosalie*] woman?"

Rosalie's agent tried to mollify the general to no end in the big antechamber with its decisively non-military decor. Rosalie listened from among the majesty fronds.

The general wasn't having any of it. He said, "Captain Holt, I want you to head back out and report that the staff are non-cooperative and unforthcoming." Their sat-coms had no signal beneath the mountain.

Captain Holt said, "Yes, general." Then the blast doors closed behind him. He said, "What the fuck?!"

Rosalie appeared at the other end of the room, at the mouth of a long hall. She said, "I'm Ms. [*Rosalie*]. How can I help you?"

The general started belting her with hints of what he'd uncovered at Area 51. Ten seconds into his speech, Rosalie hit the trap door that sent two hundred men down the hatch. Rosalie's agent went with them.

Rosalie reported that the general never arrived beneath the mountain. By the time a serious investigation got underway, Rosalie had already scrubbed everything. Rosalie cleaned up the loose ends she'd left at Area 51. Such was Rosalie's position in the USA intelligence community. As the leader of psychic warfare, there was no supervision of the woman. From the day the general fell, Rosalie was certain of her absolute authority in the United States of America.

When Rosalie was seventy-two years old, she was schlepping one Sunday across the floor of the lowermost level of her dungeon. She took off her backpack and arrayed several vials where she would fill them with the bucket from the pit. Some vials were bound for autism vaccines in poor areas, some were bound for the food chain. Rosalie was hosting the mushroom



ravioli party on Tuesday, and she knew her friends would be expecting the vilest hell of homeopathy in the cocaine she served them. The days of mushroom ravioli with wine alone were long gone.

The prisoner became accustomed to life as a cat and lived in the dungeon for many years. One Sunday when Rosalie was seventy-two years old, he silently approached her at the pit's precipice. Her psychic senses did not warn her. The prisoner's brief torture and wits taught him to keep his mental trap shut.

On that Sunday, the prisoner thought the words very clearly and tried to say, "Sometimes the cat sneaks up on the gravedigger." Rosalie heard the words in her mind even when she couldn't tell what the sound was. She dropped the bucket. It plunged into the deep. The prisoner nudged her where she lay. Her true face unhidden in the darkness, Rosalie fell into the pit. Then she woke up at Barney's and decided to nap a little while longer.

When Rosalie was 2,723 years old, the prisoner was once again her prisoner. In the fully infinite Jigantemum Jibode and not only in Rosalie's hell beneath the mountain, Rosalie hurt the prisoner. Though the prisoner's bones were harder than obsidian, the Dark Lord imported industrial abrasives from the technological reaches of her magical empire. The prisoner existed in anguish between the grinding stones. The agony did not abate. Every twist of the stone was followed by a turn.

Grit by grit, Rosalie thought she was killing the prisoner. She said to him, "Didn't you think it was odd," she fluffed her red hair, "that of all the men on that ship," she examined her ends, "I was attracted to the one," she looked at him, "with rotting flesh?"

After Rosalie disappeared, Kirstell watched the surveillance footage. She gassed the lower reaches, and the prisoner died. He woke at Barney's and had a nice meal while Rosalie slept above. He never knew her real face. She forgot his.

# 47

DRAGHOR flew high in the sky, higher than he'd ever flown. On previous approaches by land, the Snoutistan turret defenses' explosive blaster power was enough to push on the weight of the dragon and the rider, even while it couldn't harm them. The Snoutish defenses could impede them but no more. Diving on the central city, the prisoner avoided the immobile blasters on the turret towers that pocked the countryside of what was once called No Man's Plain. All across the city and suburbs, however, a million long-range anti-air blasters like the one strapped to the dragon's head opened fire. With the Powers of Zarganthos, Draghor wove among the flashing red lines of the city's air defenses.

The paladin wove among the blaster fire as well. With a magic deflector shield and holy shield, the occasional direct hit could not repel the cuttlefish's dive bomber descent behind the dragon. The occasional hit on Draghor impacted the dragon's dive momentum not at all. The captain's wheel hung secure inside the shield at the dragon's neck. The electric shield wrapped around the dragon's blaster helmet and melded to allow the outgoing blaster fire. With the Powers of Zarganthos, the paladin and the dragon dove down on New Snoutistan. When the Eternal Enemy's enemies were low to the ground, many blasters would not fire on the Snoutish buildings behind

them. The million blasters became thousands, hundreds, and then several dozen as the tall buildings came into the field of fire. Blown slightly off course dodging the rapid-fire laser blasters strewn so densely across many square miles, the daring duo drove onward toward the metropolis' tallest buildings.

The Snout Shockers deployed in light power armor rocket pack gliders to close the distance with the dragon and the cuttlefish. With Land Waster and shield in tentacle, and clad in steely holy armor with gold trimmings, the bronze feature on the golden shield clasped in his first and third tentacles being the Octopus Crest of Vinci, Zorolo da Vinci drove past Draghor. He swashed Land Waster through the air, and a tidal wave energy weapon engulfed and mangled a dozen power armor packs at the front of the storm. Draghor sniped the Snout Shockers while he had them outranged with the skull-mounted laser blaster.

Draghor tried the dragon's breath he'd been denied. By the Powers of Zarganthos, the dragon belted magical fire particle beam energy that sliced through the thinning swarm which yet engulfed as it began to close on all sides. The magical dragon's magically Zarganthean fire blasted the base of a building in downtown New Snoutistan. It and three buildings behind collapsed at the onset of the dogfighting between the swarm of Snout Shockers, the dereality dragon, and the Seventh Paladin of the High Council of the Paladins of Gaia. With increased Zarganthean super speed, the dragon and the paladin picked the winged warrior pigs from the sky. Draghor's claws mangled the Snoutish steel like a man crushes a tomato with a hammer.

On the horizon, a dozen super power armor pigs appeared. The paladin swooshed Land Waster, and one was cut in half with a blue disc explosion. The dragon stopped using the skull cannon which was insignificant above the Zarganthean fire power. In fifty microseconds, the dragon's breath ablated the hull of one super armor. Then the entire thing was vaporized. The remaining power armors came into range with their

midsized mini-missiles and launched a swarm of homing rockets. Even swarming among the rockets with the Powers of Zarganthos, many of the rockets did hit their targets. The mini-missiles would recalculate trajectories after missing and come around again. The dragon's and the paladin's initial defensive strikes on the missile hail greatly reduced the number of missiles, but there were very many. The paladin's magic and his magic armor protected him from the explosions. The missiles hardly knocked him about in the air as he slew two more super armors by magical cleavage. The dragon grappled with one for a moment and ripped it apart over the spot where it crashed in pieces. Four more super armors were incinerated by Draghor's breath before the first piece fell.

As the last super armors were dispatched, another swarm of Shockers appeared from the northeast. A thousand or more rocket pigs buzzed in the sky like a sand storm around a dozen super armors *and* a dozen mega armors which were large even with respect to the dragon's size. At the long-range advantage, the dragon and the paladin decimated the oncoming formation, but then they were among the missiles again. Having cast out his brain worms and fully replenished his magic, the firepower of New Snoutistan's finest was not enough to dent even the armor that was the paladin's second wall of protection inside the magical shield. Zorolo da Vinci dove into the chest of a mega armor and blew it open. In flight and dogfight, he hunted the rocket pigs and used the sword's effortless magical concussion in close combat. The rocket pigs dropped like flies and lit up like sparks when the dragon's breath strafed them.

Draghor blasted his dragon breath. For one millisecond, the breath vaporized one mega armor's head. For another millisecond, it vaporized tons of steel from a super armor hull, and then the wide-open cone of long-distance energy covered an entire mega armor. It too disintegrated under the vaporizing pressure after about five milliseconds.

The paladin and the dragon drifted over a dense bank of blasters like those mounted on Draghor's skull. A thousand

beams vaporized pigs at close range and greatly jostled the paladin while the dragon drove on nonplussed. While the dragon showed his aerial acrobaticity, the pig pilots did the same and came up wanting. The paladin dove low to the ground among the flashing red beams from the bank of blasters below. Level on the square mile fenced off for the blaster bank, the paladin hew down the forest of ten-foot blaster barrels with four hard chops.

The dragon ripped the head off of another mega armor with his claws. He threw it through the air and tagged a rocket pig that was hovering with its laser rocket grenade machine gun steadily trained on Dragher's broadside in a furious but futile fusillade.

With super speed, the paladin rejoined the fight in the air. The last mega armor grabbed Dragher by the tail and was pulled off its trajectory by the Powers of Zarganthos. The paladin swung Land Waster across the sky with his frontmost rightward tentacles wrapped around the pommeled grip. More than a hand a half sword, the triple broad bastard cut a parabolic blue arc that pierced the remaining mega armor and caused it to explode a thousand yards away.

The dragon made the dive toward the host of tall buildings in the downtown area, and the paladin picked off the remaining rocket pigs like a fighter escort. The dragon descended on a shadowy street where Pimplefus Gashgore reported the secret Snout Shocker/GFB military headquarters. Dragher tucked his wings and landed hundreds of feet above the street. His claws shredded furrows of broken windows along the two buildings' facades where he braced himself for more apocalyptic fire. Grasping buildings on the east and west sides of the street, the dragon's fury burned. Directly down, and slightly to the north and south, the dragon swept the street with magic fire. Everything vaporized before the Zarganthean power.

The street's vaporization exposed the utility level of the streetscape ninety feet above what had once been called No Man's Plain. The dragon's fire vaporized the utilities. A main

water line spilled into the canyon carved by the dragon's two seconds of sustained fire. The water turned to steam and plasma as the dragon craned his neck to the north and to the south, then to the north and south again, and then slowly back and forth once again. Draghor blasted through the subway just below the old surface. In moments, Draghor was destroying the secret government subway level. He was almost to the military compound when the ultra armor got the best of him.

A few blocks away, the paladin drew a line of destruction hewing down skyscrapers to the south.

Unseen, one of two ultra armors in New Snoutistan dove into the urban canyon. The dragon below burned a canyon of fire where the street had been. The main impediment to the dragon's drilling was revaporizing the slag tending toward the bottom of the linear crater. Still, the dragon blazed. Thousands of tons of molten and gaseous slag spewed onto the streets of downtown New Snoutistan. The ultra armor came from above while Draghor blasted down. Like a man stomping a mouse, the ultra armor got the drop on the dragon. It stomped Draghor down into the slag.

Whereas the dragon could grasp the buildings that oppositely lined the street with outstretched legs, the ultra armor could hardly fit between the buildings. Below, the force field kept out the heat of the dragon slag, and the riders were not burned. The WW-3 Ruby Town Inertial Dampeners™ mounted inside the ribs kept the riders from being jarred too much as they watched the battle unfold on the inside of the force field. The prisoner, the captain, the bosun, the samurai, and a slew of Space Marines clung to the suspended netting which shook and rocked only in response to the bending of the dragon's bones.

The dragon destroyed the ultra armor. Draghor's counter-strike tore up the leg and body of the ultra armor until the head was vaporized too. Rocket pigs flared like fireflies and disappeared in the skyward extension.

The paladin was in the sky. The sparking husks of five mega

armors were at various depths of unpowered crashing to the ground.

The prisoner noticed an architectural alignment so the dragon blasted the city before rising to the storm. More than fifteen tall buildings collapsed and crumbled along the blast of burning breath down New Snoutistan's main downtown drag. The dragon rose and bathed the street in defocused high elevation fire with even more intensity than before. In seconds, the GFB's secret command facility was breached, and its general staff were vaporized. In milliseconds, the deeper levels were vaporized, and in milliseconds more, more deeper levels were vaporized. The dragon dove into the depths and sprayed annihilation from his own heart into the heart of the broken bunker. High above, the paladin dropped the last mega armor and turned his attention to the super armors whose harassments he'd been ignoring.

When Draghor was satisfied with the destruction of the GFB's high command in New Snoutistan, he returned to the surface from the glass-walled cavern of his creation. The paladin carved another line through the buildings. He laid waste to their structural columns with magical concussion. The buildings crumbled like cookies.

The dragon circled high where the long-range air defenses started firing again. Draghor dove on a cluster of tall buildings just removed from the central business district of New Snoutistan. Thirty city blocks were leveled before the rubble settled from the first felled tower. As the paladin hew down the final buildings in the southwest corner of downtown, the dragon went on to another reported GFB complex.

As the paladin wreaked destruction one building at a time, the dragon approached the perimeter defenses in rings, ten, twenty, and fifty miles out from the city center. The dragon attacked the turret towers from the direction opposite the direction of the turrets' mostly fixed fields of fire. The tank forces of the GFB mechanized infantry shot high explosive tank fire which was like nothing on the dragon. With his claws,

Draghor uprooted the turrets like military whack-a-mole and blasted others while he did it. When the ten-mile ring was routed, the dragon did the same at the twenty-mile ring while the paladin destroyed the shorter but still tall buildings surrounding the central district. The twenty-mile turrets rarely had the dragon in their fields of fire during his approach from the rear and flanking strategy. In a clockwise motion, the dragon attacked many thousands of poorly designed turrets. He eventually destroyed them all. Ten were vaporized in dragon fire for every turret Draghor uprooted and threw aside. By the time Draghor first reached that twenty-mile band of layered, outfacing defenses, more than a million pigs were dead in the densely populated but rapidly depopulating city.

The paladin carried on. The dragon carried on. New Snoutistan was routed and completely destroyed. Thirty million pigs died on the first day. Five hundred million pigs on No Man's Plain were dead in a year when starvation supplanted the GFB supply lines. Those lines that had dwindled as the southern front pushed further and further into the former Southern Empire were severed completely when the land around the jade seraphim became a disconnected planet.

The GFB never returned to that planet, all the pigs died. The Jiganthemum Jibode still pocked the planet, and the pigs did return, under another banner, after a very long time.



# 48

ONE hundred and fifty-nine times, the Eternal Enemy's brain worms and adulteries overcame the worlds seeded by Richard's children with Anne, Yessica, Alexandra, and Fátima. Before departing, the armada was in orbit over Planet Pontchartrain for about three millennia. When the worms came, ten centuries had not passed following the fleet's farewell.

The forward mission, however, succeeded one hundred and sixty times. The planet that would be called Earth was already known as Gaia to an indigenous species. There, the fungus got into the groundwater. It also went into the sea where the cephalopod race lived. The fungus came to the attention of the High Council of the Paladins of Gaia as they studied the surface dwelling terraformers of the planet that would never fall. The armada discovered that about half of habitable planets had life, but they had not yet encountered intelligent life. On Earth, the entropy in the directorate of the administration of the mission precipitated a non-rigorous cataloging of the fathmic depths of the magical oceanic planet, and the Gaians were not discovered. The Gaian empire was centered on the Mediterranean Sea. City names like Vinci and Tripoli were incorporated into the human geography when shape-shifting Gaian cuttlefish impersonated human sailors at sea.

While the Earth, and by virtue of self-identity Gaia, would

never fall to the Dark Lord, it seemed very much to the Gaians that the aliens were the advance guard for the pig menace that trailed them. Such were the visions in the minds of the Elders of the High Council of the Paladins of Gaia. On a slightly different harmonic of consciousness, the cuttlefish lived jointly in the Fractal Field and the terrestrial seas of the Earth, so they sensed the encroaching Jiganthean tentacles and went to circumvent them by attacking the Jibode itself.

Zyrozivo da Vinci was Lord of Vinci when his son Zorolo was born. That was Earth year 1023 AD on the Gregorian calendar. As a young cuttlefish, Zorolo often boarded Moorish vessels and told stories of other planets camouflaged under a nautical African accent. In 1053, Zyrozivo led a mission of paladins. Where the tentacles of the Jiganthemum Jibode were coming toward realization as underwater caves, the entire High Council of the Paladins of Gaia used their power to crack open an undersea mountain. They spilled lava into the valley where the caves were coming near an appeal to fruition. It was a terrible day for Gaia, a last-ditch effort.

The prisoner was Richard's descendant most prominently through Fátima. He was born in 1985 AD according to the Gregorian calendar. The prisoner's counterattack on the Eternal Enemy was so strong, strength among all the timelines that ever unfolded, that the tentacles of the Jiganthemum Jibode never realized on that planet.

# 49

RUBY Town's absence greatly disturbed the prisoner and the dragon. They found the sea at the end of the plain. There was no basin. There were no seraphim.

The bosun said, "Garr! I say it's true! Back to Snoutistan. Tharr's a tunnel thurr, aye. Tunnel tat turr tarr! Aye." The Space Marines knew the way to the Eternal Enemy's throne room from Ruby Town but not from New Snoutistan. The bosun assured them that he could guide them back to Ruby Town given the simple yet strict military navigation of the Jibode recounted by the Space Marines. An irregular schedule might have made it impossible, but the bosun was sure he could unnavigate the route they'd navigated. He explained that their simple course of all ups and lefts along one leg and then all downs and rights along a second leg could be used to calculate a true return path. He said, "It's counter-'tuitive, aye, but we made the calculations. Aye, we know we can retrace yer path. Yarr! All up/lefts, all down/rights. No problem."

The dragon did not believe it was possible to orienteer within the Jiganthemum Jibode. He said, "Ruby Town has to be around here somewhere."

Super G said, "Does it?"

Draghor said, "No. It doesn't. Or it might take a million years to find it, ay."

The captain said, “My bosun wouldn’t say he could do it if he couldn’t do it,” but he admitted no acquaintance with the Jiganthemum Jibode.

The bosun plead the case to enter in New Snoutistan, but the Space Marines didn’t believe the bosun. Super G and Draghor wanted to keep looking for the beach and the Great Cities of the Western Lowlands.

A marine said, “Pity the fool who thinks he’ll just have a quick look inside the Jiganthemum Jibode.”

Staff Sergeant Crawl told the bosun, “No way! I know that forward ain’t back and back ain’t forward down there. I tried it once and most of my men are dead.” So, the party searched for Ruby Town high in the sky where the orange dome would be a beacon on the green jungle and modest gray mountains. There was no jungle. There was no basin cut by a low range.

After four months, the bosun made his case again. He said, “We tell ya, mateys! Three up/lefts fer repeatin’ each down/left on the leg to the hub, and a similar proportion to the right fer the leg back to Ruby Town, with an appropriate allotment for the quasi-Coriolis forces. It’s all calculable!” After four years, the dragon party returned to New Snoutistan and agreed to follow the bosun’s unintuitive map. They would attempt to retrace the route from Ruby Town to New Snoutistan taken by the Space Marines after the weather vane craned around.

The bosun said, “Ya bastards! We shoulda gone while the trail were fresh.” The bosun’s calculations depended on the entanglement of the marines with their own pasts, and he made excuses. “So don’t blame me.”

There was a general discontentment. The bosun could not offer the certainty he’d offered when Draghor strode the fifty-mile ring during the last stages of the rout and massacring butchery of New Snoutistan. However, the certainty he’d retained for years was only lessened somewhat. Bicklesworth said, “Should be ok though.”

Once again, Draghor galloped over the ruins of New

Snoutistan. The dragon searched for the neighborhood where the bosun and the captain attended Pip Gashgore's warehouse. The entrance to the Jiganthemum Jibode lay beneath. From the partially collapsed roof of a partially uncollapsed building, the smaller beings watched the dragon rake away the skyscraper's rubble.

The paladin said, "I've got a good feeling about this."

Ishikawa said, "Me too."

Like a meerkat digging dirt in Africa, the dragon hucked clumps of rebar concrete searching for the tunnel. Draghor took the stone cover of the well, ten feet across, and threw it as a Frisbee two miles into a partially collapsed building where another five floors pancaked a dusty poof. Then he flew to the building where the others watched. The paladin rose autonomously into the air, and the others climbed onto the hammock by way of Draghor's tail bones. The dragon hovered on windy magical wings as they climbed aboard. Then he brought them to the dark and dusty entrance to hidden horror.

Draghor said, "Into the breach once more is it, old chap?"

The prisoner said, "Looks like it."

"I'll be at the beach if I can find it."

"I know you will, buddy."

"Alright then."

The prisoner nodded. The dragon was too big to enter the tunnels. The bosun said that expanding them with dragon fire would definitely disentangle the marines from Ruby Town.

The dragon beat his wings and headed southwest.

Crowl gave the Jiganthean safety briefing. He finished saying, "So what's the number one rule in the Jiganthemum Jibode? Be quiet! Number two, don't touch anything." Neither the captain, the bosun, nor the samurai had been below before. Crowl's marines were well seasoned, and the other three would travel in the middle. The paladin took point and the prisoner brought up the rear.

One by one, the warriors descended the steep circular stair

within the well beneath the warehouse. Draghor bore the Amulark of Zarganthos away. He would check back regularly, but the dragon's memory told him the prisoner would not be coming back up the well. Likely he'd come back dazed from the plain, but those memories were from the era of the beach and basin.

The bosun guided them with his non-commutative calculations. As the lines of the GFB had dwindled so, the Jibode was sparsely populated in the reaches below New Snoutistan. The paladin killed those rare creatures that appeared at the vanguard while the prisoner preyed upon the sneaky frighteners attacking from the rear. In the early days, it was rare that the marines in between saw any action at all. Then the early days ended in a dark and dank passage.

The captain handed the Space Marines' night vision goggles to the samurai. The remnant of Crowl's platoon had one extra set, and the three other men shared it. One watched while two walked blindly. As Ishikawa donned the NVGs, a hidden door opened behind the captain. A monster came forth to grab him in the silent darkness.

Ishikawa said, "Get down!"

The captain's reflexes were like lightning, and the samurai lunged into the space. With his steel, he cleft that monster in twain. All along the line of the agents of light, secret doors opened, and monsters spilled out. The marines' laser rifles cut the darkness. Their optical goggles filtered the laser light.

Many monsters were killed as Crowl broke rule number one yelling, "Rally on me! Rally on me!"

When the paladin and the prisoner closed the distance, they had passed the bodies of Crowl's men. They lay dead in the hall and long cluttered room. Only Crowl and Kirk remained. Back to back with the samurai and the sailors, they made their last stand. Monsters came at them from both directions, and the Space Marines mowed them down. With only two rifles, Kirk and Crowl could not stem the tide of beasts. The beasts bore down on them, climbing over their dead. The marines

made a berm of the dead with their automatic laser blaster rifles, but the monsters flopped forward as they fell.

The paladin appeared in front of Kirk. He said, "Clear!" and Kirk's friendly fire was absorbed by his magic armor.

Corporal Kirk opened fire in the other direction where Crowl triple-tapped another monster's chest with three red hot shots. Then the paladin attacked and killed those near the berm's other lip.

The prisoner appeared. He said, "All clear."

The prisoner, the paladin, the mustangers, the samurai, and the two Space Marines continued along the bosun's irregular path. Sometimes it was double up/lefts, sometimes it was up/left and then double down/right. The survivors carried as much equipment as they could which was considerable. The captain left The Sea Star's wheel with Draghor.

After a time, the party reached a section of the Jigantimum Jibode lit with magical torches that burned forever and did not extinguish. The air was cool and not humid like the abandoned section beneath New Snoutistan. Flat gray stones greeted them in empty room after empty room. They followed the bosun's directions, and they never stepped into hell. That modestly peaceful fragment of the wavefunction of the Jigantimum Jibode, the stabilized link between Ruby Town and New Snoutistan, was still entangled with Kirk and Crowl.

The party came to another empty room of gray stone. It was lit with eight undying torches. The bosun's directions said to go to the left in the room, but there was no leftward exit. Crowl said, "When the only exit is on the right, should we count that as a right or a straight?"

The bosun said, "Bo! Ya know..."

The captain said, "Should be a straight. There's only one exit."

Kirk said, "That's the thing about the Jibode, man! She'll get ya!"

The bosun said, "Aye! *Should* be a straight. And yet she *is* a right! Aye, a right righty righter. Arrr." It was the first such

quandary after the bosun long had proven his calculations well founded. If he marked it a right or a straight, he was going to have to recalculate. His calculation said left. "We 'ate sayin' it. Aye, we do, yarr. Surely yarr. This error's gonna propagate no matter which way we go. Bo! Hurmph."

Something like a stone wheelchair ramp rose toward the doorway in the wall on the right side of the room. The men filed out. The paladin led the way, and the prisoner saw them through. Desperately hungry having finished their field rations, the party saw light at the end of the tunnel.

They emerged onto a stone escarpment. It was daylight shining into the ruins of a building like a cathedral. The great columns still stood, but the buttresses were mostly collapsed. The walls were fallen away on two and a half sides.

The captain said, "Did we make it out alive?"

Crowl said, "No way. This is still it. This is just a big room."

Kirk said, "We're not out yet, man! This is some sick joke, man!"

The foundation stones of the grand gallery were set on a grassy hillside. Below, a lake shimmered in the sun. Several large boulders were where the little lake lapped with the childish trickle of a tide. The *beep beep beep* of backing up shattered the sound of stillness as the breeze blew. Four helmeted men in fluorescent safety vests appeared: the foreman with blueprints in hand and the orange and black excavator behind them. The smaller of the agents of light laid on the stones to watch what the men did where the land met the water. The prisoner stayed in the shadows where his sparkles would not reveal.

The paladin flew to the back of the cathedral and went high into the air using the remaining wall for cover. When he ascended, a whoosh of wind washed away the sound of backing up. In the sky, the paladin did not see the construction crew. On the stones, he did not see his party. He circled back around but could not find them. The paladin became separated in the



paradoxical geometry of the Jiganthemum Jibode.

The party watched the four men looking like engineers. One of them pointed with his arm over the water, and the others nodded when something splashed. The construction crew didn't see it, but it was plain to see from the mossy old ruins on the hill. Vines crept columns, and tiny fighting sprouts dotted the floor's exquisite but ancient stonework. On the hills outside, the moss and grass were like Berserk Hold's meadow grass.

The splashing thing in the water came to the attention of the crew boss. He lowered the plans, and the four gazed out on the water. One of them yelled, and a fifth man got down from the perch in the digger. He said, "What's that?"

The foreman said, "Is it coming over here?"

Another said, "It sure seems like it." Something swam toward the men on the shore with a rabidly irregular, thrashing stroke.

The foreman said, "Let's get out of here," and they ran up the hill. They had three white trucks parked behind the cathedral's remaining wall. As they attempted to jog up the hill (the men were not fit), a large aquatic opossum stormed onto the hillside. On land, it moved much more powerfully and then tore the construction crew to pieces. It turned to go back to the lake but then sniffed the air. It turned its head toward the place where the men lay.

The prisoner burst forth from the shadows and greeted the mutant marsupial in the grass. He punted it and sliced it in half with his metal leg bones.

The prisoner said, "Where is Zorolo da Vinci?"

He was gone. The bosun said there was no point making any more calculations because they were lost.

The prisoner pointed to the mountains across the lake. He said, "There's a structure over there." It was too far and small for the others to see with their living eyes.

The bosun said, "Where?"

The prisoner knelt and pointed again.

“Barr! ‘At’s kinda up and left ain’t she?”

The prisoner said, “Yarr!”

The captain said, “Let’s go.”

The party hiked to skirt the lake. Flowery bushes lined the lakeside, and a few squat trees grew. Further from the cathedral, the trees grew more densely, but they did not become dense enough to form a woodland. On the other side of the lake, the party started the ascent toward the prisoner’s structure. A tall black creature with webbed wings stood still among the wildflowers watching the men walk away from the water. Its red eyes glowed as the shadows of the outlanders marched across the gleam of its rancorous yellow teeth.

# 50

KIRSTELL ran Rosalie's organization for a while. Only Rosalie knew how to command the complete slave network, and it began to fray under Kirstell's administration. Kirstell gassed vast reaches of the mountain complex no longer known as the SASKATCHEWAN GIGAPLEX but rechristened as the MILK PRODUCTS FACTORY. She never gassed the whole thing. When she gassed a sub-complex, she didn't clean it out. Instead, she gassed it again with neutralizing gas and then set up her own thing on the rotten remnant under the mountain. Kirstell, even after the surface organization dwindled to almost nothing, ran the Milk Products Factory for forty-two years until it all fell apart and she died. No one ever solved that mystery. After a long time, the tectonic plates of the Earth devoured all the traces of what had happened under the mountain.

After Rosalie died but before Kirstell gassed the cats, the prisoner still lived. The Slitherfish appeared via derealization in what was still called the Saskatchewan Gigaplex. Catlike from the shadows, the prisoner watched the albino mantis-cockroach with its heavy cowl and cloak-covered thorax. The red velvet robe swept the floor from its abdomen as the Slitherfish approached the pit where Rosalie died.

The pit was filled with the trapped energy of tortured souls.

When Rosalie fell into the muck, her soul did not become trapped among the other souls. The cursed component of the trapped conscious essence of the pit knew Rosalie, and it hated her. That hate was the only honestly coherent thought in the worst abomination of life and death that Rosalie wrought beneath the mountain: the pit. The pit hated her, and it took some of her energy. In the twisted abomination, a cancer grew: an interdimensional wormhole cancer. The force of the hate when Rosalie plunged into the pit was so great, and the revulsion so strong, that reality itself was torn asunder. The cancer grew for two days before the Slitherfish appeared to inspect an anomalous derealization.

The Slitherfish approached the edge of the pit and tasted Rosalie's hand on the bucket's rope. With insectile focus of purpose, the Slitherfish went over the edge of the pit and crept down the wall. In the darkness, the milky white face of the Slitherfish came face to face with its reflection on the surface of the mirey muck. It kissed its own mouth and sipped from the cursed water. It processed the information and then climbed down beneath the surface. Where the Slitherfish emerged was the first room in the Jigantemum Jibode.

The Slitherfish was the vilest thing ever created by man. What Rosalie made under the mountain was the vilest thing that ever happened. Here or there, in any alternate universe, the single vilest thing that ever happened happened beneath Rosalie's amputated legs. It was a woman's evil. When she trapped those souls and threw them in the pit, the hyper cringe insanity burned into the ether. By virtue of being the singularly most evil event of all time, the burn of the insanity was enough to punch through when Rosalie's energy briefly joined the pit's own. Most of her energy went with her to Barney's, but some of it stayed in the pit, and the Slitherfish went sniffing for that piece.

Rosalie had a recruitment program such that all death row prisoners in the United States of America of were given a non-lethal poison and later arose in Rosalie's prison. Those guys

went into the toilet without being beforehand skinned. As soon as the bodies were taken out of the prisons, they would be shipped in sedation to the Saskatchewan Gigaplex. They were greeted upon waking, “How you pieces o’ shit doin’?”

Rosalie’s agents watched if the men would eat or drink in the big toilets. The poisons Rosalie used were quite parching. If the men would eat and drink, then Rosalie was pleased, and she would let them stay in the toilets where the skinned men went too. If they didn’t eat or drink, Rosalie took them out after two days. Then she sent them to whatever was suggested by Rosalie’s programs’ managers. Sometimes two toilet men would fight to the death for dominance in a given huge toilet bowl. Rosalie’s organization made a modest amount of money putting content like that on the dark web.

Under Kirstell, men *and* women started going into the toilets. Rosalie kept female slaves under the mountain for some of her most nefarious work, but they were segregated far from the free-roaming areas of the purgatory and hell maze catacombs. Under Kirstell, it all got mixed together. Kirstell was getting the fresh meat prisoners and illegal immigrants that Rosalie was getting, and she greatly increased the population influx with new enslavement programs. This backfired on Kirstell with the non-linear dependence of the increased investigative scrutiny of the real agencies that nearly once—but never quite did—put it all together.

On the surface, federal police would shoot citizens with fake poison bullets. The coroner would sign the death certificate, and then they were under the mountain. Between the sex perverts and high-end anti-aging products for wealthier ladies, sometimes one in three child immigrants from Central America would disappear into Kirstell’s bureaucracy. It was never more than one in twenty under Rosalie.

Rosalie’s real favorite were her ultra rapist hyper brutalizer programs, but Kirstell’s favorite was only monsters. Kirstell did maintain the ultra rapist hyper brutalizer programs for a time. Within ten years of her tenure, however, the last of the

free-roaming ultra rapist hyper brutalizers were gone from the Milk Products Factory. Better food protocols were eventually enacted by the terrestrial governments of Earth. The Gaians released a magical anti-fungal chemical that went up even into the table water of the Earth's continental shelves. It purged the Eternal Enemy's pet fungus.

An earthquake sheared the main power cable at the Milk Products Factory. When the secret government never showed up to maintain its secret contract, the regional electric company never repaired that line. The Milk Products Factory existed on vast diesel reserves for a long time, but they dwindled and were depleted.

In the Eternal Enemy's throne room, the bubbling cauldron seethed with the juice of the bottom of the pit. Because the cauldron itself was burning and bubbling, nothing from the Jigantemum Jibode ever entered the Earth from under the mountain. Nothing went through, though the throne room was just at the bottom of that pit.

The armada would eventually return to the Earth. They came forty millennia after Richard's descendants on the Earth launched a follow-on mission. There began an empire of humanity that never fell to the brain worms. Richard's descendants flourished in the galaxy. In time, they left the galaxy via hyper spacetime. Humanity never went extinct.

# 51

DEEP in the Jiganthemum Jibode, the Slitherfish gave a sermon to a host of men and women in gray and white business attire. A few colorful ties and shoes did not disturb the somber monotony. The deep-drilled salt mine mausoleum was well lit with torches. Dramatic shadows danced on the Slitherfish's face parts.

The refrain came from the assembled leaders of a surface cult, "Long live brain worms!"

The Slitherfish continued from the putrid pulpit of its lies and then fell silent. It snapped its head around toward the shadows in the back of the long bunker hall. Its insect head being mostly unturning, the entire long body of the albino cockroach jarred the congregation with its quick whip to the side and luxuriously spilling cloak. The Slitherfish sensed an attack, so it scurried out through the back of the room. When it disappeared among the heavy black curtains and shadows, it knocked over the podium with its part like a cloaca. The business formal congregation began to murmur as the Slitherfish went through the airlock. Evil gas filled the room, and the bloodlust orgy of violent insanity began.

The Slitherfish sensed the prisoner setting foot on the structure beyond the lake. Like Stonehenge on the mountainside, the old oracle's stage waited for the prisoner and his party. The

golden giant set foot on the stones, and far away the Slitherfish fell silent.

The prisoner pointed back toward the lake and cathedral which were very small far below. He said, "That's definitely down and to the right, ay?"

The bosun concurred proudly. He said, "Yarr! Makes this up 'n' to 'a left, don't she? Aye, she do! Calculator calcatron!"

Crowl and Kirk took note of the cathedral. They begrudgingly conceded that the lay of the land did put the cathedral in a direction which was generally down and to the right along the lie of the valley. The concession was begrudging, but Crowl and Kirk were very glad to be able to hold onto their hope that maybe, just maybe, the bosun did know what he was talking about. The bosun was borne out straight away. The orange glow from the Stonehenge cave was cast by Ruby Town's deflector shield. The golden giant, the mustangers, the samurai, and the marines stepped onto the high platform above Ruby Town. The legend of the golden gleam high in the sky lived on for millennia.

Kirk said, "Are you kiddin' me? Are you kiddin' me, man?!"

Crowl said, "Follow me, men," and plunged down the stair into the Ruby Fortress.

The prisoner took careful note of the wizard's staff. It rattled gently in its ring stand while the arc of electricity crossed the air to power the giant dome. The prisoner looked around Ruby Town and saw the river of lava flowing like a monster at the gates. He looked far out over the basin for Emerald Station but could not see it. Fifty times smaller, Emerald Station had no glowing shield, and Ruby Town's own obscured the fine features afar. The prisoner leapt. He touched the underside of the defensive shield. It was just like he remembered. He fell back to the platform, and his heel bone chipped a stone. Then he followed the five men down the stair.

Crowl and Kirk led deeper into the Ruby Fortress. They encountered no one. It was abandoned, though the city below teemed with life. On the fifth floor of the fortress, the fifth



floor up from the roof of the Ruby Spur, the staff sergeant said, "Alright. Here we go." At the back of the long room, a secret bookcase door was ajar. The maw of the *Jigantimum Jibode* hung open.

The nuclear weapons that the Space Marines had meant to detonate were only around the throne room and not in the throne room itself. To get to the throne room itself, Crowl would use another secret door.

Kirk said, "Help me with these poles," as Crowl closed the secret bookcase door.

The prisoner and the corporal set up the XVRB-9000 Ruby Town Tunnel Tentacle™ in front of the books. When it was done, Kirk said, "Stand back, big guy."

Kirk flicked the power switch, and it hummed to life. The portal at the mouth of the tunnel tentacle turned blue then yellow. Blue and yellow, then yellow and blue again, the tunnel tentacle began to alternate colors more quickly. Concentric circles of blue and yellow soon pulsed from the platform's perimeter poles to the center of the portal. Thin white bands separated the blue from the yellow and similarly separated the yellow from the blue. When the rings annealed to a still green glow, Kirk said, "Looks good."

Crowl pulled a laminated mission briefing from one of his camouflaged blouse pockets. He typed on the tunnel tentacle's console. One by one, the corporal, the samurai, the captain, the bosun, and the prisoner stepped through. Then Crowl stepped through, and they were inside the long-dead catacombs under Rosalie's mountain. In the Ruby Fortress, the party re-equipped so all the men wore night vision goggles as they descended toward the pit at the bottom of it all. The party came to the main elevator shaft which was unpowered. This left the prisoner to rip the metal gates apart. The men hung on the prisoner's back as he carried them down, one by one, to the lowest level. When they were all below, they crossed the final stretch where Rosalie once crept, and where the remnant of the prisoner's own body lay mummified.

At the pit, Crowl said, "This is it. It says the throne room is right down there."

Kirk looked down. "There's no throne down there, man!"

The deep pit still held water. The tortured souls were still down there, though the long rest of silence was upon them after the base fell finally into disuse.

The captain said, "Down there?"

Crowl said, "That's what it says."

Kirk said, "Mission specs had us in armor!"

Crowl thought the same thing and said, "True." The Space Marines had long abandoned their armor in a bid to fit through a narrow passage after the nuclear mission fell apart. The prisoner made some tough squeezes along the way, but he was thin compared to the bulky Space Marine power armor suit.

The bosun said, "Narr! Lemme see 'er map, Staff Sergeant." He checked it. The map showed the throne room at the other side of a hatch where there was only a pit.

The prisoner said, "I'll go check it out."

Crowl said, "Do you think so?"

The prisoner rapped his metal knuckles on his metal skull and said, "I think so." He jumped into the pit and sank. He sank and sank.

In another dimension, Rosalie cackled as the hyper brutalizers did their work. The man strapped to Rosalie's cutting board watched the image of his family brutalized in the magic steam over a lesser throne room cauldron. In the main cauldron, the one just before the empty black and bone throne, four gold fingers came up through the rolling boil. They reached over the cauldron's lip, and another four fingers appeared unseen in the heart of darkness. The prisoner pulled himself upward, which was downward with respect to the sense of upward beneath the mountain, into the cauldron. The gold dome of the prisoner's skull crested the bubbling broth. He saw the Dark Lord and let go. He sank again and then climbed up to the place where Rosalie fell.

The prisoner climbed out. He said, "Rosalie is there." He

told them what he saw. He told them about the boiling black cauldron.

The captain said, "Is there any way for us to get through?"

Kirk, seeing no way, said, "It's the Jibode, man! The fuckin' Jibode don't play!"

The bosun said, "You're a lot stronger than us anyway, Super G. Yarr ya'are. If any o' us were going to go all the way, 'twould be ye. Aye, 'twould! Barr! Ye should go ahead alone."

The prisoner said, "Hold on." He sat and dwelt on the problem.

Crowl chastised the prisoner. He said, "What's he waiting for? He's going alone or nobody's going. There's no other way."

Ishikawa said, "Silence, marine! He gathers his energies."

After ten minutes, the prisoner told them his plan. He jumped once again into the pit, but he didn't peek into the throne room. At the bottom, his hands climbed over the sides of that old wrought iron cauldron. From within the burning and the bubbling and the boiling, the prisoner ripped that cauldron apart like a strongman tearing through the yellow pages. The shriek of wrenching metal tore through the throne room. Rosalie was frightened only for a moment before the whole volume of the pit spilled into her home. The prisoner tore a hole in reality. The slimy bog of the pit flash flooded the throne room of the Jigantemum Jibode. Like a burst pimple, the glop and muck was evacuated from the depths of the Earth.

The gravity changed when the prisoner tore reality open, and the depth of the pit decreased. The five men under the mountain were able to run down the wall of the pit to descend upon the throne room. Ahead, the Slitherfish blasted the prisoner. Under the altered gravity, the prisoner fell past the others along the pit's wall. He nearly put a ton of metal arm bone through Kirk's chest, but the marine dodged as the prisoner tucked and rolled.

Through the squeezed wormhole bridge, Crowl and Kirk

were the first into the throne room. They saw Rosalie attempting to stand in the septic sludge. She was in her own formfitting black body suit. Her hair was soaked with filth. The sweep of the wave of the pit of her creation greatly disoriented her, and she did not immediately flee using her magic.

With its blaster array not quite tail and not quite turret, the Slitherfish blasted Kirk even as Kirk's laser rifle lit the room. Flashing red, the marine's fire did not come around to Rosalie before the Slitherfish's blue bolt cut Kirk down. His head vaporized. His neck was a charred stump.

Half a step behind Kirk, Crowl scanned the room for Rosalie. As he brought his rifle's barrel to bear, the room flashed only blue. The Slitherfish vaporized Crowl's head before he could pull the trigger.

Half a step behind was Ishikawa, already bringing his sword up high. Even as Kirk's head and then Crowl's disintegrated in front of him, Ishikawa was happy. Standing under the mountain, the samurai knew his death lay just beyond the pit. The samurai had stalked his noble death for a long time and nearly had it. From *The Grim Ghost 2*, the jade seraphim told him his destiny lay in the land beyond. The jade lions' paws and claws were the same on the bronze lion he'd known outside the Zen temple as a child. When Ishikawa ran into the throne room, he was not disturbed to see the two marines fall before him. He was already bringing his sword to bear as he plunged into certain death. The Slitherfish tried to zap him, but the blast hit the sword and did not kill him. The samurai blocked the laser blast and sprinted forward. He envisioned slicing Rosalie with his remaining nub of sword.

The captain stormed into the throne room with blaster pistol in hand. The Slitherfish zapped him, and a tunnel of light shone through his chest. Half a step behind, the bosun entered the throne room. The Slitherfish's heavy fire tail turret zapped the bosun too. The prisoner saw light through both big barrel chests before the men fell dead.

The prisoner entered, and the Slitherfish evaluated whether

to blast the prisoner first, or the samurai. Ishikawa had taken two steps closer to the Dark Lord, but the Slitherfish knew to be wary of the prisoner. It opened a small door on its chest where it had a special anti-prisoner blaster. It fired at the prisoner and vaporized his skull completely.

At that moment, a trillion years of rounding error rolled over on the ticker deep inside the Slitherfish. Like a million years with no leap years, a cascading system failure went through the Slitherfish. It was nothing more than a high sigma fluctuation in the cybernetics, a twenty-six-sigma event, but the Slitherfish opted to use the chest cannon to dispatch the samurai and not the tail turret. The Slitherfish rotated its body and pointed the chest blaster at Ishikawa who drew his sword high overhead for the killing stroke on Rosalie. Ishikawa was completely incinerated.

With the Powers of Zarganthos that yet lingered, the prisoner was able to take another long headless step forward. When Ishikawa disappeared, the prisoner took another. The Slitherfish's machine learning algorithms had not accounted for the Powers of Zarganthos when it turned on Ishikawa. In the computerized rounding error and second miscalculation, the Slitherfish blundered in the throne room. The prisoner strode as the Slitherfish turned again. The prisoner swatted Rosalie with his metal hand. Her flesh and bones could not resist. The Dark Lord was obliterated.

Before firing a second time on the prisoner, the Slitherfish yet recalculated. It tucked tail and made for the shadow in the corner with its derealization engine and time machine. Even as the Slitherfish disappeared into the dark cloud of dereality, the prisoner, his skull gone and sternum half melted, took yet a third step. After swiping Rosalie, the prisoner carried through and grabbed the Slitherfish's egg-cream-colored hind leg. The Slitherfish pulled the prisoner into the shadow in the corner of the room. Then the dereality ended. A golden right leg and left foot were set in the throne room's moldy stone walls. Rosalie's thousand splattered pieces were on them too.

# 52

BEFORE the octopi attacked The Sea Star, the Ascendant sat behind the mizzen mast and donned the crowns they would wear for the viewing. Thirtyseven Double D and Jarrow downloaded the data about each Ascendant person's life at that time. They stored it in encrypted form among the jewels of the chest and transmitted it ahead, at the risk of interception, during the first octopus attack.

When The Grim Ghost 2 finally arrived in Exland, the Pen-dragon Knights of the Guild of the Greater Good convened an extraordinary council.

Guild General Alejandro said, "If this man has the power to kill the Eternal Enemy, then we must rescue him."

The Guild dispatched a time travel mission to ascend the prisoner in life before Rosalie could snatch him. For every mission that went, the Slitherfish was there as well working to ensure that the prisoner always ended up under the mountain.

On one such alternate timeline, the prisoner was released from prison and ordered to report to a halfway house. He had \$30,000 buried and no intention to get there. He walked instead toward another California town. On the back of the stop sign was written GFB in dripping black paint marker.

The prisoner walked the thirteen miles to Clarence's house where he met Clarence's three flatmates. Clarence said,

“You’re not going to the halfway house?”

The prisoner said, “No, man. I’m going to make a run for it.”

Clarence said, “Really, man? Why not just go?”

“You know why, man. Come on.”

Clarence’s roommate appeared at the door in blue bib overalls and a red flannel shirt. He said, “Oh. That’s too bad then.”

The second roommate said, “We’re real sorry to hear that.”

The prisoner’s gaze became transfixed by a feature in the woodwork of the paneling over the room’s tiny fire place. His mind fell deeply into the swirling lines of brown and black that told a story he soon forgot, and then he woke in the master bedroom closet. The prisoner was very still and knew he was wrong to come for the money.

Rosalie’s agent, a creature like Rosalie, said, “You didn’t think we’d forget about you, did you?”

The light coming from the window in the bedroom shone on a half-full laundry basket. The voice was in the closet’s dark shadows, on the other side of the beam of light. It said, “No, you didn’t think that, did you?,” but it didn’t know the prisoner was awake as it muttered to itself.

The creature fumbled for the closet’s trap door. The prisoner stood and ran. The creature, wearing no legs in a stump-featuring, stump-flattering black leather sadomasochism thing, said, “Oh? Feisty!”

At the door to the hall, the prisoner looked back. On the tan carpet, the torso clad in black leather was bathed in sunlight. The zipper across the mouth was open and the eye blinders were flipped aside. The prisoner fled. In the living room, Clarence, who was truly Pseudo-Clarence, and his new friends heard the prisoner dashing down the flimsily framed stairs, but he was out the door before they could stop him.

The prisoner ran for his life, and the sadomasochism creature scampered with agility across the front yard. It yelled, “Where ya gonna go, [*Super G*]? Huh? Where you gonna go?”

The sound of pursuit did not reach the prisoner’s ear, so he

turned for a glance near the next house. Three men and a creature hurled insults at the prisoner from Clarence's driveway. Behind them and in full view of the prisoner, The Win Ship descended from the sky. Clarence and the creature were crushed to death between the concrete and The Win Ship's keel.

The ship skidded to a halt near the prisoner. Able Seaman Zerbert threw a rope ladder over the side. Doctor Twelve's red face greeted the prisoner as he ascended in life. The prisoner climbed aboard The Win Ship, and it rose into the sky which soon popped such that they were on the Negative Fractal once again.

Twelve said, "[*Super G*] my boy, how are you?"

The prisoner said, "What is this?"

Twelve said, "Ah! You've so much to learn! Yes, so very much to learn!"

Captain Sfethen said, "You remember me? Narr, course you don't."

Bosun Gronk said, "Arrr! We sure does 'member you though! Aye, we do. Bo! Arrr!"

The prisoner went with them to the Port of Higher Calls. When the winds came, they picked up another group of Ascendant from among Richard's paradoxical lineages. Ensign Tycho told the Ascendant, eventually, "So don't fall asleep!"

Beneath the starry daytime sky, the prisoner went to the forecandle of the ship through the tunnels of rigging and sail. He watched the waves and thought he would rest his eyes for a moment. He wasn't worried about getting to where he wanted to go.

The prisoner woke in an airport waiting for the old flight ten to Washington DC, but he didn't see the westward storm brewing through the east-facing terminal windows. The captain, the bosun, and Ishikawa sat across from him. To his left was Crawl, and two seats further Kirk.

Bicklesworth said, "Barr! Ya did great, Boney! Look atcha now! We'll have to come up with a new name fer ye. No bones



now, narr!” The prisoner was clad in living flesh.

The captain said, “Good job, master. We knew you could do it.”

Crowl said, “Not too shabby, big guy.”

Kirk nodded.

The prisoner said, “What zone are you in?”

The bosun pulled the folded receipt from his pocket. He said, “Zone four.”

The captain said, “I’m in four too.”

Crowl said, “We all are.”

The prisoner thought to check his own receipt. They were all in zone four. The counter agent called zone three. The prisoner stood and looked out to the sunset tarmac where the wind was gusting. Zone three passengers descended from the terminal and walked about fifty yards to the plane. They boarded along a mobile stair whose wheels were locked at the fuselage.

The prisoner said, “So I killed Rosalie, huh?”

The bosun said, “Barbo bibbins, ye sure did! Bashed her brains, aye. Biff basher, smasharoo!”

The captain said, “You did great.”

Then the terminal around them was completely empty. A voice on the intercom called zone four. The six men went from the terminal down to the tarmac where the hard wind blew. Lightning flashed and bathed the scene in white. Behind the airport, the prisoner saw the swirling clouds of doom and adventure. Purple and gray, and white and black, the high storm cell surged steep in the sky.

Kirk was first up the stairs. Crowl went behind him. The stewardess waved them to their seats. The big and burly Guildsmen, John Atlas and Cairomon Bicklesworth, were about as large as men could be to comfortably fit through the hatch on the side of that plane.

The bosun turned at the top. He said, “What’re ye thinkin’, Boney?” The captain between them turned as well. They faced the prisoner who was reluctant to mount the stair. The

bosun said, "Aye! Ding, dong, the witch is dead, Bonesy. C'mon."

The prisoner looked at the captain. The captain said, "She's dead, master. It's over. You sent that bitch to hell."

The prisoner thought about it and looked back to the storm which called to his soul. A light patter of rain began, and the taste of dust filled the air. In the flashing tones of the encroaching storm, a bright bolt of lightning broke free. Once again, the scene was cast in the strobe of white. The prisoner saw a rider on the ridge. He said toward the plane, "But what about the Slitherfish?"

The captain said, "What's the Slitherfish without the Dark Lord?"

The bosun said, "It's the Eternal Enemy ye killed, master! Don't be a fool. Battle's over, aye. Don't go gettin' lost again. Narr! Narr, a shame, aye."

The prisoner said, "What if it goes back and saves her?"

The bosun said, "Narr, she don't work like that, Bonesy. Narr, she don't. The black bitch were at the center of it all, not the farkin' fish."

The prisoner said, "Yeah, but what if it goes back to the place where she *was* at the center?"

The captain pursed his lips. The man had a point.

The prisoner looked to the storm again as the rain quickened. Lightning flashed behind the rider, and the prisoner gained super sight. Somehow, he recognized the face of Ban on Man Whose Children Always Prosper. He was on the ridge with three spare horses.

The captain said, "You coming?"

The prisoner said, "Nah, Imma stay." Then he went to the rider, and they rode into the storm.





